



Designing Democratic Schools and Learning Environments

A Global Perspective

Edited by Linda F. Nathan
Jonathan F. Mendonca · Gustavo Rojas Ayala



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FOREWORD

REIMAGINING SCHOOLS TO EDUCATE DEMOCRATIC CITIZENS

Democracy is fragile and in decline around the world. Fulfilling the promise of democracy, as a path for greater freedom and justice, requires that we ask again, “How can we educate students to live in a way that prepares them for the practice of democracy, building with their actions an everyday democratic culture?” We should ask this question in the company of others, as an invitation to a conversation, for it is from these conversations that communities and nations can reimagine schools that better sustain democracy at a time when this is very necessary. This book is a refreshing contribution to those conversations. An analysis of the ways in which schools which exist around the world, as well as designs of schools that could exist in particular contexts, could contribute to helping students develop the habits of mind and dispositions necessary for democracy. The book is the result of collaborations of my colleague, Professor Linda F. Nathan, with two of her former students, Jonathan Mendonca and Gustavo Rojas Ayala, who together edited this valuable volume. Professor Nathan teaches a course on “democratic schooling,” in which students examine what is democratic education, and an education that contributes to democracy, and write a final project either examining a school that embodies democratic principles or designing a proposal for a school that would embody such principles. The editors invited some of Professor Nathan’s former students and real-world practitioners to turn their experiences into the chapters which are contained in this book. It gives me special pleasure that Jonathan and Gustavo were also my students in a course

in which they contributed chapters to an edited volume resulting from a similar process. To see them now exercise leadership, in collaboration with Linda, to engage their classmates in a similar process of making their work available to the public is a reminder of the generative power of the experiences we create for our students, which can inspire them to build on them, and make them better, for the benefit of others.

There are at least five reasons the pedagogical approach of Professor Nathan contributes to develop her students' dispositions and competencies that are relevant for democracy. First, the approach conveys to students' great respect, in considering them partners, colleagues in co-constructing knowledge. This is the foundation of democratic living, extending to others the same respect we would wish for ourselves. This respect for others builds on the premise that people are capable of self-direction and self-governance. The significance of this simple approach is underscored considering two simple questions: How many schools or classrooms provide students opportunities to pursue projects of their own choosing? And how are students ever to learn to make choices, and to live with the consequences of their choices, if they never have the opportunity to make them in school? Second, this project engages students with real-world issues and invites them to create solutions, not just to contemplate the problems. Democracy, this great project of the Enlightenment, is based on the premise that ordinary people can not only improve their own circumstances, but improve the world. By engaging students with complex problems, such as how to educate students for democracy, and inviting them to construct solutions to those problems, Professor Nathan is inviting her students to practice what it is like to try to improve the world, to be crew, not passengers, in the democratic journey. The third way in which this course is preparing students for democratic living is in having students think deeply about how schools around the world can create opportunities for their students to learn essential democratic values and skills. Thinking about what it takes to make democracy work, as the result of the actions of ordinary people, is an important skill to empower everyone to do their part in contributing to this collective project of self-improvement and societal improvement. It is especially important for educators to engage in this kind of deep thinking. It is noteworthy that none of the chapters examines a school that teaches "civics," which is the most conventional way in which preparation for democracy is typically understood around the world. This does not mean that the authors of this book consider the knowledge of the institutions of government, of democratic constitutions, irrelevant, but perhaps that they don't see this as the

most promising area to empower students as democratic citizens. Perhaps the biggest theme of this book is that to learn democracy as a way of life, democracy needs to be lived in the school, not just studied in the civics textbooks. Fourth, the collaborative project leading to this publication makes visible that there is not a single way in which schools can prepare students for democracy, but instead there are many. The recognition of plural ways of addressing a common challenge is an important skill in a democracy. Furthermore, these plural ways can be all integrated into a coherent whole which is more than the sum of the parts. This book is, in some respects, a “negotiation” or a “creative compromise” among these many ways to educate students for democratic living. Democracy itself requires the intellectual humility to know that, for many of the challenges we share with others, there is not a single way, as well as the tolerance and the capacity to value the ideas of others, and for creative compromise across those differences. Finally, this project invites students to share their thoughts with others and to be part of a larger conversation about democracy. There could be no greater form of democratic preparation than to invite us to be in dialogue with others, not just in communities of others like us, but across communities, in the manner in which this book will engage the authors with communities across the world. In engaging students in these five ways of learning from experience, this book is not only an invitation to other educators to consider how they might engage their own students in practices of democratic creation and dialogue, but a powerful reminder of the capacity and willingness of students to solve problems that truly matter. What reservoir of talent there is in our education institutions, largely untapped, sitting dormant, because so many see education as preparing students to one day be able to be contributors, when education could be reimagined to engage our students as contributors while they are educated.

My hope is not only that this book invites many conversations around the world about the ideas it contains about how schools can support students in developing stewards for democracy, but that it will inspire the authors of the book to keep on writing, and in so doing to create for their own students in the future similar opportunities of collective creative construction of democratic experiences and knowledge, so that these ever-expanding ripple effects contribute to reimagine democratic education, to continue to advance the elusive quest for freedom and justice.

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Fernando Reimers

PREFACE

The three co-editors, Linda, Jonathan, and Gustavo, come from very different backgrounds with a range of experiences spanning school design, school management, teaching, organization development, and policy advocacy. Each co-editor has worked in distinct historical and geographical contexts and, in this chapter, they share their own journeys. They describe their own professional and personal experiences and make connections to the emergent framework for democratic schools.

LINDA'S JOURNEY

As I look back over more than four decades of a career in education, I reflect on my interests and experiences in democratic learning environments. As a beginning teacher, in an extremely hierarchical school system with autocratic principals who made most decisions alone in an office, or with one or two others, I certainly didn't experience all aspects of the framework that we have articulated here; nevertheless, I learned early on the importance of engaging students' own interests and passions in order for me to be a successful teacher and leader. I co-created a small bilingual middle school that reflected the importance of the open flow of ideas. Later, as the co-director of Fenway High School, I experienced an additional aspect of this framework as we confronted some of the most urgent problems of our time. As the Founding Headmaster of Boston Arts Academy, we strove to incorporate all of the framework's components, for better or worse. As the co-founder and co-director of a leadership

preparation program, the Perrone Sizer Institute for Creative Leadership (PSi), we strove to instill this framework in our ongoing work. This is my story.

*Democratic Education Emphasizes the Open Flow of Ideas
and Choices, Regardless of Their Popularity*

As a young teacher, in the early 1980s, I was asked to start a bilingual performing arts middle school in Roxbury, MA. In 1974, *Lau v Nichols*¹ made bilingual education legal, although it was extremely unpopular nationally. Bilingual education advocates proclaimed that young people had the right to learn in their mother tongue and that this would increase their English competency; however, opponents argued that the United States was an English-only nation and that learning in two languages would detract from accessing English. These debates, exacerbated by increasing immigration, have never really subsided.

Tobin Academic and Performing Arts Middle School was born with this vision: a powerful bilingual academic curriculum immersed in the arts. The city was still reeling from the racial violence that exploded as a result of court-ordered desegregation in 1974, and Tobin promised to be a model for what could happen when children of all races, cultures, and languages came together to learn. Given its location in Mission Hill, most white families would bus their children into the neighborhood. The Mission Hill community, which was mostly Hispanic and African American, embraced the school and welcomed the new families from outside of the neighborhood. We had an explicit contract with everyone: we will create a curriculum that is deeply engaging, relevant to your children, and gives them many opportunities to learn and express themselves. Furthermore, children would learn to perform in both Spanish and English. In other words, we stressed that the community had to embrace bilingualism. The school was widely successful. Parents felt heard and involved; students were excited to learn through and in the performing arts; teachers had the power to make decisions about curriculum and scheduling. Community organizations played an important role in the school as well, including helping parents to organize for better housing conditions and increased

¹Nichols. *Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974), was a US Supreme Court case in which the Court unanimously decided that the lack of supplemental language instruction in public school for students with limited English proficiency violated the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

job training programs. We knew that stable and safe housing and employment had a huge effect on how children performed academically and artistically when they were in school. We didn't want to pretend that the school could cure all the economic and social obstacles of society all by itself.

However, as founding teachers, we didn't have control over hiring or budget and eventually our hard-fought gains began to fray as decisions were made autocratically by a single principal. Even our teachers' union couldn't protect us: seniority ruled and teachers were assigned to the school, regardless of their interest in being part of a new program. Still, while it lasted, the Tobin was a unique experiment in democratic schooling: voice, choice, and the involvement of all stakeholders in decisions. We lived aspects of the framework for democratic education that this book explores. In the next vignette, I describe how I lived another aspect of our framework.

* * *

*Democratic Schools Organize Social Institutions, Parents,
and the Larger Community Collaboratively to Achieve Its Goals
and to Solve Society's Most Urgent Challenges*

Enormous upheaval in both school and society occurred in the mid-1980s. HIV/AIDs and the crack epidemic were suffocating cities and destroying families. Gang activity and violence was on the rise. Our students were not immune—they were angry, scared, and disenfranchised. I became co-director of Fenway High School, and we had to find ways to make school more tantalizing than the streets. Attendance was at an all-time low and student disengagement at an all-time high.

We couldn't solve all of society's ills, but we developed a new course called Social Issues. This class met the first period of the day for all students, and it was taught by every teacher, no matter their academic discipline. We had a student curriculum committee and over 50% of the topics were selected and developed by students. Topics directly impacted students' lives, neighborhoods, and world: HIV/AIDS, the crack epidemic, court-ordered desegregation of schools in Boston, music of the Civil Rights movement, Women's Rights, and the War in El Salvador. Conversations from the first period spilled over into the hallways and into the rest of the day. We saw a marked improvement in attendance and

engagement. Students who rarely talked with one another were now arguing about the Social Issues curriculum in the hallways. Social Issues became the centerpiece of the school and the way we ensured that student voice, interests, and passions guided decision-making. Classrooms were set up to achieve maximum student voice by arguing about difficult questions. The arguments were real. The questions mattered. How you answered could determine how you lived your own life. Suddenly school had high stakes.

As the Social Issues curriculum became more and more central to our ways of thinking about teaching, learning, and assessment, we began to define the important competencies and skills our students needed to master. We developed interdisciplinary projects that incorporated learning in neighborhoods and community settings. A popular initiative was “Project Week” when our students would collectively study a topic such as “What makes a good museum”? or “Is Boston a liveable city?” Traditional classes were suspended for the week and students worked in small groups across grade levels with a teacher/coach, researching, interviewing, and conducting site visits. Student confidence soared as they presented their findings to city councilors and other local changemakers and influencers. Their ideas mattered. In fact, each year city officials and non-profit directors waited eagerly, albeit a bit nervously, for the central question that Fenway students would tackle during Project Week. We wanted students to develop a strong sense of ownership over their own learning. The teachers were there to support their journey. We also began to change the way we assessed learning: we created demonstrations of mastery—exhibitions—and weaned ourselves off of an over-reliance on easy-to-score multiple choice tests. We decided that students should have opportunities to exhibit their expertise before family and community, and not just for Project Week. We wanted the high school diploma to be awarded upon a successful final demonstration of mastery.

Along with students and parents, we explored how the tone of the school should explicitly and self-consciously stress values of unanxious expectation, of trust, and of decency (fairness, generosity, and tolerance). These were ideas that had also been articulated in the *Coalition for Essential Schools*, a national reform organization founded by Ted Sizer and Deborah Meier. The *Ten Common Principles* became a framework for how we developed our school. This translated into conversations and team-building across and within different racial groups and cultures. We began each year by taking all of our 250 students camping. We wanted to ensure that we knew one another as people first and that together, as a community, we could answer the question: What is the portrait of a Fenway graduate?

To be a democratic school, our goals had to apply to all students. School practices had to be tailor-made to meet the needs of every group or class of students. Teaching and learning needed to be personalized to the maximum extent possible. To capitalize on this personalization, decisions about the details of the course of study, the use of students' and teachers' time, and the choice of teaching materials all lay with the professionals in the school.

Most importantly, questions of equity were at the forefront of decisions we made. We explicitly developed policies and procedures that honored the diversity of our students, family, and faculty. We committed to challenging all forms of inequity. We were striving to create a learning environment that was inclusive and accessible to all people—an important tenet of our framework.

Still, we felt constricted and constrained by a school system that seemed completely disconnected from the lives of our students and families. We wanted more autonomy. In the early 1990s, charter schools were sweeping the country as the new cure for struggling public schools. The charter ethos, at least at first, emphasized that decision-making should be the purview of those closest to the children. At Fenway, we embraced these ideas. They aligned with the *Ten Common Principles*. However, most charter schools also sidelined unions. That gave us pause. Even though the teachers' unions often had not been strong on issues of racial integration and protections for black and brown teachers, the idea of teachers having no rights and being at-will employees was unsettling. Despite these concerns, we voted to become a charter school.

At that same time, in 1995, the Boston Public Schools, along with the teachers' union and the Mayor, introduced a reform effort that would fundamentally change our school system: Pilot Schools. These schools would be guaranteed the same autonomy as charters but within the district school system. Teachers were still union members. We, therefore, gave back our charter, and Fenway became one of the first six Pilot Schools in Boston. Twenty-seven years later, schools like Fenway are still fighting for autonomy of curriculum, assessment, budget, governance, hiring, schedule, and calendar. The central office always pushes back. Even though the struggle is ongoing, and the central office often demands uniformity, the benefits of the Pilot model are clear. Autonomy and equity can co-exist and be complimentary.

*Democratic Education Is a High Quality Equitable Education
and Is Accessible to and Inclusive of All People*

When I founded the Boston Arts Academy (BAA) in 1998, I brought the *Ten Common Principles* and the autonomy of Pilot Schools with me. We asked our founding faculty, students, parents, caregivers, and community members the same questions we had asked at Fenway: What should graduates know and be able to do? We held many community meetings with stakeholders over the course of a year, which revealed consensus: graduates needed to know how to write, and, specifically, they needed to know how to write a grant since artists in the United States live and die by grant writing.

The mission statement for the school was: “*We prepare a diverse community of aspiring artist-scholars-citizens to be successful in their college or professional careers and to be engaged members of a democratic society.*” In true democratic form, every word and punctuation mark was debated. We knew that some students would go straight into professional arts careers, while others might not (the “or”). A mission is what a school stands for. The mission in a democratic school also creates the space for youth to develop and grow in ways that are unanticipated or surprising. In addition to a powerful mission, we also needed to establish a set of shared values that would live in every classroom, studio, and hallway, and guide our interactions with one another. In our case, these values emerged from an infraction that occurred in our second year.

During one particular dance class, a student had stolen a phone from another student’s bag. There was a long emotional discussion with everyone who had been in that class, but no real resolution other than finger pointing, accusations, and tears. No one confessed. And then, a week later, someone scrawled “White Power” on a bathroom wall. The entire student body reacted with outrage and anger. Again, we could not get anyone to confess. Instead, we laid out a plan for how we would address the violation. First, Ms. Carmen Torres and I (as the two co-leaders of the school) met with the entire student body to express our disgust. We explained that we didn’t tolerate racist behavior in any form. We canceled the last period of the day and everyone met in advisory groups—small groups that were mixed by grade—to discuss how students and teachers should respond to the incident. We gave everyone a series of prompts about community responsibility that could be used for discussion and writing. There was an outpouring of ideas and concrete next steps.

Students wrote how, as artists, they were in a privileged position to fight against hatred and racism. Others expressed fear at not feeling safe. We posted everyone's responses on a long wall in the school: "Student Responses to Community With Social Responsibility."

That was our first shared value to emerge. Through months of discussions with faculty, students, and family members we agreed on three more:

Passion with Balance;
 Vision with Integrity;
 Community with Social Responsibility;
 Diversity with Respect.

We called these *Shared Values* as opposed to just "values," because we wanted them to define what our entire community stood for. We needed to have common language and definitions for what it meant to be an individual within the greater BAA community. These had to take time to be developed, discussed, lived, and practiced.

Shared values became a way to talk about what was important in our community and even the way to address some of our rules. Students suggested that we open up Honor Roll Assemblies to include affirming students "Caught in the Act of Shared Values," and that became an important recognition for students, and a way to continue to hone in on what these values represented and what to do when there was a clash.

Discussions about "Passion with Balance" helped our young artists recognize when they were ignoring one part of their school day in favor of the other. Too often our students wanted to spend hours in the studio and neglect their academics. They needed to learn how to do both and that was hard.

The arts are key to helping young people learn to work collaboratively—often across cultural, linguistic, racial, socio-economic, and gender differences—and to tell their own story. We wanted our students to do that with integrity and vision. We stressed that our students know on whose shoulders they stood while they created their own work. Responding to plagiarism, for example, became an opportunity for teaching, not just punishment.

We wanted our school to embrace an open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity. That might include studying a new art form like hip-hop that the traditional arts field deemed not worthy of study. Or it might mean creating structures for solving problems among the faculty that

didn't depend on the principal. BAA was a place that regularly reflected and analyzed ideas, problems, and policies. We believed that if we embraced the shared values, along with the CES *Ten Common Principles*, we might just create a democratic school that lived its mission of being for all.

We continued to ask about decision-making. Who has voice and power, and about what? Are those processes clear to everyone? We were thinking specifically about how to ensure that our school reflected a democratic learning environment.

This regularly played out with annual discussions about the daily schedule. A schedule represents an organization's beliefs about the relationships between people, time, and money. How much time is given to which subjects? Where and when do students get extra support? How does the schedule reflect school-wide goals? What are the ways a school develops and then showcases rituals and traditions? At BAA, we believed in being a non-tracked school and learning in heterogeneous groups. With these goals, what was the best schedule to achieve them?

Democratic Education Supports the "common good" Through Consensus and Compromise

In the 15 years I was at BAA, we had 16 different schedules. This was purposeful: we were always trying to get better at how we used people, time, and money, and we wanted to be as inclusive as possible with decision-making. Faculty meetings need to focus on the master schedule. What are we trying to improve and why? What are our constraints and aspirations? The process for developing schedules often involved a "schedulerama," where various groups of teachers, and even students, would pitch their ideas for adoption for the following year or the year after. The constraints and drivers were laid out beforehand. For example, a constraint might be that we couldn't hire any more teachers. A driver might be that all students had to experience some kind of social emotional learning block such as advisory. It was a productive and time-consuming process, one that gave everyone equal footing to have their ideas considered. Importantly, the master schedule was rarely constructed by one person alone in a solitary office.

One of the constant gray areas was the question of whether an arts school that has auditions can be truly democratic. This was always perplexing to me and sometimes I suggested that we didn't need to include auditions for admissions. I offered that we could admit students by lottery just

as other schools in our district did. If we wanted to have some competitive ensembles in music or dance, for example, we could audition internally for. These ideas were never embraced by my board or even arts teachers. I was always reminded of the way the arts exist in the “real world” and how orchestras or ballet companies operate with first violins or prima ballerinas. I found these practices Eurocentric and I advocated for different principles—closer to a true representative democracy rather than a democracy with a meritocracy undercurrent. I wanted to ensure that we had representation from many Boston schools, especially those schools that were under-resourced in the arts. Questions about the interplay of excellence and equity continually arose for us. Our ongoing debate was whether we were a school that teaches “to the arts or through the arts”?

Carmen Torres and I always landed on through the arts. We felt that approach was more inclusive, but we understood that many of our arts department heads needed to teach firmly *to* the arts since they were judged by the outside world by how many graduates went on to professional careers. The tension persisted.

We didn’t intend to resolve the differences that came from “to” and “through” the arts: we embraced them in ongoing discussions. In fact, this dialogue became central to our existence. I am not sure I can claim that BAA was ever truly democratic because auditions remained central to the school. At the same time, we continued to consider how to be inclusive of all. And, the conversations continued. That ability to probe, dialogue, and disagree may be one of the most important features of a democratic school.

We also stayed laser focused on our students’ experiences in order to always center issues of equity. Which students were getting best served and why? Who was on the honor roll? Who wasn’t? What did the data show? What was the racial, linguistic, ethnic, or gender breakdown? In our early years, we had students sit on curriculum committees that made actual decisions about course offerings. Students had choices about projects and ways of demonstrating knowledge. We prioritized collaboration as well as individual achievements. Again, the idea that the common good, or collective achievement, was as important as individual success was novel for many of our students. We wanted students to understand that the typical “dog-eat-dog” philosophy that many had heard since birth did not have to be a guiding life principle. We wanted to instill a new kind of thinking: the pie could be enlarged. The whole is stronger than its parts. Sometimes students balked at the fact that a grade would be given based on how well

the group did as opposed to one person. Our goal was to create a learning environment where all voices and perspectives were heard and valued.

In addition, students needed to feel and believe that their work mattered to them and to others. School could not be “preparation for life”—it was life. From this belief, the Senior Project was born. The Senior Project was an opportunity for students to combine academic and artistic talents to explore a community-based need. It was a complex project that required students not to patronize as in, “I can do this for you because I know things,” but rather to explore what a community truly wanted and how they, as young adults, could help bring that to fruition. More importantly, it was an opportunity for young people to realize that “school” was about tackling real-world problems as well as thinking about community activism and service. We were asking young people to use their voice, values, and knowledge from their communities to address changes. Student projects addressed police violence, the need for more after-school arts programs, attitudes about hair and skin tone, gender issues, and economic justice for BIPOC youth. Some students received funds to actualize their projects and many students comment, still today, how their projects have continued over time. Students immersed in education for liberation will demand a learning environment that meets their needs. That is what happens at BAA. In this way, students, teachers, and family members continually and openly debate the very purpose of school.

A democratic school does not have to run by consensus (although a few schools do), but processes and procedures have to be clear. If departments are given a budget, the process for allocating funds must be clear and teachers deserve to know what to expect in terms of their classroom and department. Clarity and communication are critical. Always. We decided to have department heads rotate so that everyone had a chance to lead and to follow at some point. We wanted everyone to learn to lead through and with challenges and obstacles related to money. We learned that questions of equity needed to be continually revisited and committed to and not reside solely in one person’s purview. Moreover, we learned that we need regular practice at having difficult conversations. One cannot expect a school to suddenly “be” democratic. These practices are like muscles: they must be continually toned.

Concluding Thoughts

As I look back on the students, faculty, and families that I taught and worked with over more than four decades, I am struck by how many continue to live, breathe, and debate aspects of this framework. Many of my former teachers talk about the narrowness of schools that don't regularly debate working conditions such as the schedule. "I know the schedule is made by people, and I want to be part of a school where that debate is central," one teacher tells me. A white alumna reports that she hated talking about "race all the time at high school, but now I get so impatient with my [white] friends when they ignore race. I learned in high school that race and racism is everywhere. How we confront racism is what matters."

Even as democratic learning environments seem to be threatened across the globe with a new rise in fascism and alt-right political activities, I remain hopeful. My work focuses on preparing future school and non-profit leaders both at Harvard Graduate School of Education and beyond. Ten years ago, alongside my longtime collaborator, colleague, and friend, Carmen Torres, I founded the Perrone Sizer Institute for Creative Leadership (PSi). We named the Institute in honor of two twentieth-century philosophers and educators, Vito Perrone and Ted Sizer, who had such a profound influence on both of us professionally and personally. Their work and beliefs can be seen throughout this framework and in our Institute. They believed passionately in "the common good" and the ways in which schools, and those that work in and among them, could model consensus and compromise. At PSi we believe in the role of creativity, community organizing, and how schools can reflect the best of their communities. We believe in leaders who embrace moral courage and fight for equity and inclusion in all forms. We prepare leaders who create structures for distributive leadership and authentic roles for family members. We have now graduated over 200 emerging leaders and we are hopeful that their schools will become models of democratic learning environments.

All democracies, whether in countries or schools, are collective projects. Collective decision-making structures, practices, and policies must be maintained over time and updated when needed. Democratic learning environments must continually meet the challenges of our times at the same time as they welcome and value all voices and stakeholders.

Today, with such extreme polarities in politics, and with every aspect of society facing challenges, we must continually fight for learning

environments that invite the open flow of ideas and stand against oppression in all forms. Schools can still try to be protective spaces that are identity affirming, where students and teachers can express themselves without fear of reprisal and where learning the skills of communication, debate, and synthesis are valued. We need schools that honor and support the development of multiple points of view to arrive at a decision in ways that support the common good while upholding each other's humanity. Without the opportunity for these democratic learning environments to flourish, I fear our global world will be severely compromised.

JONATHAN'S JOURNEY

My journey into the field of education has not been linear but rather an immersion into the many facets that make up schooling. As Co-founder and Director of Barefoot Edu Foundation, I have played the role of an educator, educator trainer, institute builder, and policy advocate. I realized that at every level, decisions which are difficult to take are often difficult because they are not ours to take alone. My goal, no matter my role, taught me to trust in the potential of people and focus on empowering leaders at the grassroots level so that the voice, values, and goals of the communities which they serve democratically shape education.

My foray into education began on a \$2 million construction site in India. Colleges in India tend to keep sciences and social sciences separate and so, as a civil engineer, my training was purely technical. I studied about buildings, materials, forces, and the many processes involved in construction. However, I was building with people and for people, without having ever studied about people. I knew how to design structures physically stronger than human beings, but not how to nudge the humans who were building it to show up to the site on time. On my construction sites, the daily wage masons, nearly all of whom were migrant laborers, would cut through granite, wood, and other gifts from the earth with exemplary skill but their poor knowledge of geometry led to a significant amount of building material wastage. After cutting the granite and wood that they needed, the balance material from each slab or wooden member could not be used to make anything else required on site. They were far more skilled than me with their hands but did not have access to the formal education that I had. I had two choices. The first was to account for the 15% material wastage that was codified in the International Standard Code, or the second was to upskill myself and work with the laborers to harness their

potential. I began to conduct trigonometry sessions for the masons and coached them to ensure the dignity of labor and fair wages. Through the process, the material wastage reduced, their wages increased to 4.7 times the amount of what an average migrant in Mumbai earns, and every detail of work uniquely belonged to these craftsmen. I saw how education can unlock human potential, and through the process I discovered my passion for teaching.

This led me to pursue the Young India Fellowship at Ashoka University. I wanted to understand the systems which governed society and what I could personally do to restore the dignity of those who were most underserved. Ironically, my biggest transformation occurred just outside the walls of the campus when I began visiting schools and encountered the children of these migrant laborers in Haryana, India. This was the first time that I had interacted with children attending the early grades of school who did not possess the attention span to sit through classes, the fine motor skills to hold a pencil, nor had they attained the cognitive ability to comprehend multi-step instructions. More than 200 million children attend low-fee community and government schools in India in which low-learning outcomes exist, similar to the children I had met. A number of reasons drew me to the education sector—my concern for these children beginning their life at a disadvantage by rote learning foundational concepts; my recently discovered love for teaching; and my belief that education could harness people’s potential.

I launched an after-school program teaching children from under-resourced schools about concepts such as biomimicry that aimed to provoke their curiosity to learn from everything around them. Slowly, I began linking these sessions to their school curriculum. The learning curve during my early teaching days was steep and every session that I conducted was a window into how children preferred to learn. My lack of experience as a teacher allowed me to bring a different perspective to the classroom. For instance, since I was not trained to effectively use a blackboard, the way it is taught in B.Ed. colleges (and I must admit, my handwriting on the vertical board surface was terrible), I would use the projector and other visual props. Without commenting on good or bad, it broke a pattern that children were used to and they often called out when something was excitingly different. Contrary to popular belief, children were accepting of me not knowing the answers to everything and enjoyed the class more when they could explore along with me. Further, mutually agreed upon norms that allowed children to speak to each other during the

session removed the preconceived notion that they were “disturbing the class” but instead credited them with the responsibility to share their thoughts, ask questions, and add considerably to the learning experience. I increasingly saw the value of student voice in classrooms and learnt how teachers who possessed unique insights into children and their behavior could amplify student participation.

My children insisted that I speak to their teachers and help their school carry this curious environment beyond my sessions into the daily classroom. Taking their suggestion, some months later I launched a teacher training program that worked with teachers to create a democratic and holistic learning environment for these children. I knew that their feedback would be crucial for my training program to lead to successful implementation and so I kept an open channel for the teachers to share their honest opinion of the program. The teachers informed me that when they tried to implement some of my suggestions to increase student autonomy, their school principals were concerned that they were deviating from the curriculum and might not be able to complete the prescribed syllabus. It was a similar story which principals reported about their management or board. It soon became clear that in order to create a learning environment where teachers and students have the space to experiment and drive positive change, a culture of democratic decision-making would need to be embedded into the very essence of school policy, involving all stakeholders.

Over the past five years, I built an organization named Barefoot Edu Foundation that now works directly with over 130,000 schools in India and also the system that governs these schools. My co-founders, Saumya Aggarwal and Subhankar Paul, and I envision a future where every child has a strong foundation to think, feel, dream, and thrive. We chose the name “Barefoot” Edu for our organization because we believe that when one walks barefoot they are more sensitive to what they trample on, an awareness especially required while working with children and in the social sector.

We tried to embody this principle of “taking steps sensitively” in a school in Madhya Pradesh for children belonging to the families of tribal farmers. We encouraged teachers to teach in the local language, Nimadi. The children, however, asked us a number of times for the language of instruction to be switched to English. Despite having created a full-fledged plan to transition the curriculum to the local language because neither the teachers nor children were fluent in English, we asked the children to state their arguments to convince us “why English.” The next day, one of the

children returned with an empty packet of fertilizer and pointed to the ingredients on the back of the packet, written in English. His family had paid for organic fertilizer but could not read what they had been given. Even though our intention was genuine, we had been hasty in formulating a plan and realized the power of truly consulting the community. Post this incident, things changed significantly. We involved students and parents in multiple discussions regarding the vision of the school, design of the curriculum, and how to determine the most pressing challenges of the community.

The agrarian community where our school was based had nearly emptied the groundwater from the aquifers that they were perched on and had also depleted the soil fertility with the excessive use of fertilizers, pesticides, and water-intensive crops. Local farmers told us that formal schooling, which focused on an urban perspective, was not relevant to their context and ended up alienating their children from the agricultural profession. We collectively thought about how the challenges faced by the community could directly connect to the education that the children received. If successful, then children wouldn't have to make a choice between school and society but could develop a deeper understanding of both simultaneously. We attempted to bring problem solving, project-based learning, and critical dialogue into classrooms. A big challenge in applying quality project-based learning to schools is often the limited capacity of the existing staff to facilitate such experiences. Therefore, we scouted for institutions that could be mobilized to create such education in the school. We partnered with local agrarian NGOs and converted scientifically developed solutions which they had practically implemented into a curriculum. It focused on sustainable agriculture and watershed management for our school. Over a period of four years, nine of the UN's SDGs were actively addressed at our school through this curriculum and it was taught by the local NGOs that specialize in these fields, facilitated by the school teachers. Just a year subsequent to our intervention, school enrollment and attendance increased, and 62% of the graduating class was able to secure a fully funded higher education—as opposed to returning to serve as labor in agricultural fields post schooling. This was the start of my affinity for education, which focused on student agency, community challenges (or the common good), and a mobilization of communities and institutions to achieve its goals, in short, a democratic education.

In 2017, with my team at Barefoot Edu Foundation, I led a district-wide project which involved converting over 1400 “Anganwadis”

(government child-development centers) into effective preschools in Haryana, India. At that time, early childhood education was not mandated under the Indian Right to Education Act. This law only applied to children six years of age and older. In order for teachers at these centers to run effective preschools, they would have to voluntarily embark on a journey of continuous, demand-driven professional development. Periodic training and handouts alone would not be enough. Therefore, we tried a new democratic approach. Teachers were asked to think of one activity that they intuitively knew would lead to child development and then implement it in their preschool. Teachers were then grouped into peer-learning clusters of 20 based on proximity to each other where they regularly shared these practices and their learnings with each other. When teachers were trusted to be knowledge creators rather than recipients of an intervention, they felt ownership and created hundreds of low-cost, contextually relevant resources and activities. This was one of the initiatives that successfully motivated the State Government of Haryana to allocate an unprecedented budget for the regular training of 24,000+ Anganwadi teachers across the state.

Over the years, I've realized the strength in a community of change-makers, and witnessed the beauty of initiatives evolving into a movement. I designed a capacity-building and research lab for principals, called *Rehnuma*, which means one who unfolds the path. We build the capacity of principals in principles of entrepreneurship so that they can use local resources effectively and drive innovation in their schools. Here, principals take ownership of the challenges they face and develop contextual practices for school improvement within their capacity to implement that leverages their community knowledge and local resources. Similar to the democratic approach which we took with Anganwadi teachers in Haryana, principals are encouraged to share their co-designed best practices to a larger community of principals through peer-learning networks. They even collaborate to share physical space and resources across schools, and work together to address broader community challenges such as adult literacy, child safety, and freeing up community play spaces to name a few. Through this autonomy, principals of these under-resourced schools have been able to achieve a wide range of outcomes simultaneously, not easily achieved through centralized or non-democratic interventions. Outcomes include an increase in attendance, student engagement, and student academic outcomes while decreasing teacher attrition and student dropouts, reinforcing the notion that democratic learning experiences can be

powerful at driving positive change. Principals now take ownership of driving change in their communities and conduct “sammelans” or gatherings to share their learnings with hundreds of other principals.

Driving change that challenges the status quo is not easy, especially reorganizing ancient institutions such as schools. I have consistently been reminded of the exuberance that is created when people are invited to participate in and drive change that affects them. That is why educators should not try to take on this behemoth challenge of transforming education alone but rather find strength in a community and look to others to simplify taking action. Positive deviance is a concept based on the principle that “in every community there are certain individuals or groups whose uncommon behaviors and strategies enable them to find better solutions to problems than their peers, while having access to the same resources and facing similar or worse challenges.”² Borrowing from this philosophy, I reached out to Linda and Gustavo to co-author this book which identifies outliers that have been able to deviate positively and create democratic learning environments even in the face of adversity. I believe that making visible the stories of educators who grappled with the challenges involved in creating democratic learning spaces can be an inspiration to millions of schools, educators, and school designers that intend to create such spaces.

GUSTAVO’S JOURNEY

Life has taught me in several ways that education is a key to escaping inequity and poverty. When I was a teenager, my family went through a severe financial crisis after my dad lost his 25-year job at Valparaiso’s Public Port due to its privatization. My brothers and I started working to help my parents make ends meet, but we were always told that our education was the key to a better future for ourselves. Making great efforts, my parents never stopped paying the small but significant tuition charged by the

² *What is Positive Deviance?* (n.d.). Positive Deviance Collaborative. Retrieved August 18, 2022, from <https://positivedeviance.org/>.

publicly funded private school³ I had attended all my life. But considering Chile's high education landscape of the early 2000, it was clear that my parents could not afford college tuition. So I placed my hopes on achieving top grades throughout high school and earning a scholarship. Against the advice of many, after getting high scores on the university selection test I enrolled in a Social Communications and Journalism bachelor's degree with a full scholarship. And five years later, I became my family's first graduated professional.

Although many people in my family tried to influence my decision in favor of a more lucrative career, my motivation to become a journalist was not the likelihood to make money or to move up the social ladder. What I wanted was to be able to play a role: to make a contribution to the efforts of building a society in which a better life did not depend exclusively on having the capacity to pay for basic enabling aspects such as education. I wanted to be a part of a change process to build a country that did not corner others—like it did to me—to either pay the way up or compete to do so.

However, early into my years as an undergraduate I realized that the spaces available for journalists and communicators trying to challenge the status quo and its inequities were very scarce. And before the expansion of internet connectivity and the arrival of social media, alternative communication projects were always a good opportunity to connect with a small audience of like-minded people. But they were not an effective place to pursue large-scale transformation. So the feeling of failure, of having made a bad decision, started making me consider other professional pathways. But it was not until I lived my first unintended and spontaneous experience as an educator that I would decide to abandon the idea of a professional career in journalism and transition to education.

As a recent graduate, I was constantly exploring for projects to create communication platforms closer to marginalized communities. I tried and failed many times. But finally, I ended up finding an opportunity focusing in schools as spaces to explore new ways of using communications as

³Publicly funded private schools (or *escuelas subvencionadas*) were created in Chile during the 1980s as means to privatize the provision of instruction. These schools received funds (subsidy) through a voucher system, on the basis of the total number of students and their daily attendance levels. This subsidy could be complemented with complementary payments by families. Recent changes in Chilean legislation have forbidden co-payment. For more, see https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290503484_The_Public-Private_School_Controversy_in_Chile.

means for social and political change. The project was to transform sixth graders from public schools into political analysts. With secure funds to buy air time on a local radio network, a colleague and I approached school principals and asked them to recommend students labeled as problematic. Without experience or training as educators, but with a good understanding on how intimidating an open mic on a live radio broadcast can be, we anticipated that students facing difficulties following their school's discipline rules would be less susceptible to freezing on stage. We were not mistaken.

After selecting four male and four female students from two different schools, we started working to prepare for our first phase of the project—to build a sense of team. We wanted students to feel comfortable around each other, while also empowering them as analysts and communicators. To our surprise, they did not need our long and boring explanations as to why political news were relevant to discuss on a radio show. And it was not necessary to empower them in their role as political analysts. These students showed an immediate interest in politics that we did not anticipate. Their surprising motivation allowed us to center in on the specific tasks of scanning national and local press to find topics of interest for discussion. Next, we collaboratively developed guidelines for the contributions each one wanted to make to the topic. Finally, students practiced their commentaries and received feedback.

Niños Al Volante (Children behind the wheel) was an opportunity to explore what could happen if traditional media spaces were populated by students instead of adults. And, I witnessed the positive social and intellectual development of these students. At the project's final reunion, the students' parents commented that besides being a great source of motivation, their grades in school had improved and that the discipline issues had disappeared. When they asked us, "[W]hat did you do to them?" I did not know how to respond. But this question catapulted me into my new career.

After this first surprising experience as an educator, I started wondering about how the public education system could label some students as disruptive troublemakers while these same students were able to excel in roles such as political analysts or social communicators? How could a project completely unrelated to any type of traditional teaching schema (at least my own naive personal experience as a student) encourage struggling students to academic and socio-emotional learning?

With these questions, some books, my guitar, and my most essential personal belongings in my backpack, I moved to Chile's poorest region:

La Araucanía—a region where most of Chile’s largest indigenous nation—the Mapuche—live and struggle to reclaim property and autonomy over the land. Mapuche translates to “people of the land.” This area is also where many national and international forestry companies operate.

In Cunco, a small and beautiful village that I still like to call home, I became the Spanish and Literature teacher for more than 350 female students. Initially, I thought I was there to teach them how to explore the world around us through literature, how our language and communication work, and how to achieve better opportunities through new knowledge and skills; but after my first unforgettable weeks of failing as a teacher, I realized that I was also there to build a refuge for brave young women to embrace their stories and to dream of things they had been told were out of their reach. These students taught me what it meant to be a girl in their respective communities. It was the twenty-first century, yet their families would not consider them capable of pursuing a professional career just because they were women. I learned about how violence toward women was completely commonplace in their communities.

Before becoming a teacher I had a sense of purpose. But after being a teacher I also had a sense of responsibility. This sense of responsibility invited me to keep adding questions to my backpack. These new questions made me think about the relationship between education and society as a whole. How many of the challenges that teachers and students face can be totally solved by schools? Are there any limits as to what schools can do to improve society? To what extent do schools reproduce social injustice? How deeply can society be transformed through teaching and learning?

Why Democracy and Education?

Reflecting on the journey that brought me to this point, I now see clearly that building a more democratic society has been a very important driver of major personal and career decisions in my life. From becoming a journalist to transitioning into teaching, from moving to a country’s poorest region to moving again to a completely different and unknown country to a country like Mexico, and from trying to find answers to always keep looking for new questions. All those transitions are episodes on a trajectory aimed at building a better society through democracy and education.

Being a Chilean national, democracy has profound meaning for me. I was born under the military dictatorship that overthrew President Salvador Allende from office in 1973 after a coup conducted by the Chilean armed

forces and supported by the CIA. During this period, any views that questioned those alternative views to that of the government were silenced. Violence and murder was rampant. The political space was coopted by powerful military and economic elites who laid the foundations for a highly individualized and market-oriented type of society. As the dictatorship ended in 1989, I witnessed the frail recovery of democracy, which had to learn how to live with many of the economic, political, cultural, legal, and institutional changes produced during 17 years of dictatorship.

The post-dictatorial period was largely dominated by a bipartisan political system that dealt with the responsibility to set clear boundaries to Augusto Pinochet's power, while continuing to implement the "modernizing" market-oriented type of policies developed during the dictatorship. These policies were designed by the "*Chicago Boys*," a group of policymakers highly influenced by Milton Friedman's writings. Education experienced some of the most profound changes as a result of the adherence to these new ideas. Chile was among the first countries in the world to adopt the United States' voucher system to finance education. In addition, Chile was an early adopter of charter schools as well as high-stakes standardized tests to serve as means to measure school's quality. As a student, I was completely immersed in this system, for better or worse.

Despite constant positive outcomes in growth and poverty reduction during more than three decades, in October 2019 Chile experienced an unexpected and massive social uprising. In every single city in the country, people went to the streets to call out the government and politicians using a single word: **dignity**. Although the meaning of this event is far from being fully grasped by social scientists and politicians, some argue that these protests were the climax of decades of ignored frustration and irritation caused by the profound structural transformations imposed by Chile's military dictatorship and then implemented during the democratic governments that followed. The unseen levels of social unrest and violence could only be mitigated with the promise to rewrite the national Constitution. I experienced these events as my family and I moved back to Mexico after living a couple years in the Chilean Patagonia. And they would be followed by another unexpected event: the COVID-19 pandemic. These experiences became avenues to reflect about the intersection between education, democracy, and society.

Exactly one day before Chile experienced its social crisis, the city of Culiacan (capital of the state of Sinaloa, where my family and I now live) was besieged by criminals in response to the arrest of one of the sons of

Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman, one of Mexico’s most important drug lords. The people in Sinaloa try to ignore as much of the narco culture as possible: they are generally very law-abiding citizens. However, after this event it was clear that organized crime (violence, drug abuse, corruption, and lots of cash) has profound economic, social, cultural, and political influence in this region. And this harms democracy.

Nevertheless, many political and civic organizations are trying to challenge this stereotypic scenario through different initiatives and I have the honor of leading one of them. Mexicanos Primero Sinaloa is a non-profit that advocates for children’s right to attend, to learn, and to participate in their schools through policy analysis and research. In our context, education for democracy offers an alternative to the short and dangerous life as a member of an organized crime group. We attempt to consolidate the civic values necessary to disrupt the cultural hegemony of these criminal forces.

But COVID-19 revealed just how far we are from fulfilling these ambitions. The pandemic exposed the major structural injustices and flaws that hinder students from pursuing better life opportunities as well as contribute to improving society. Prolonged school closures have affected students since March 2020, especially in communities facing the greatest socio-economic marginalization. And as national and local governments fail to take the silent catastrophe of learning loss and school dropout seriously, it is highly likely that the goals to reduce the pre-existing learning gaps between the rich and the poor and to minimize the probability that young people will end up involved in criminal activities and other damaging behaviors will become much harder to achieve.

I still believe that the current crisis can be an opportunity for change, both in schools and in our larger society. Buoyed by a recent UNESCO report, the international community is embracing how to implement large-scale systemic transformations. *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education* (2021) suggests that civic responsibility and democratic education may be complementary forces.

Specifically, the report acknowledges the direct relationship between pressing global and local issues such as the climate and the migration crisis, and the need for more knowledge and learning to solve these issues. There is a window of opportunity that schools might address: complex and unpredictable challenges exist and vast amounts of information, knowledge, and ideas are just one click away given the access to the World Wide Web. Schools and learning environments have a huge role to play. The

future may be uncertain, but education can help us build dreams together with hope and optimism. This is the vision that guides me on my journey as an educator, a parent, and a citizen. This is why I reached out to Linda and Jonathan. I am inspired by the community this book will create and the solutions that will unfold.

Cambridge, MA, USA
Mumbai, India
Mexico City, Mexico

Linda F. Nathan
Jonathan F. Mendonca
Gustavo Rojas Ayala

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ABOUT THE BOOK

This book explores democratic schools and learning environments across the globe. We do not refer to “big D” Democracy in a parliamentary or governmental context. We are using the word “democratic” to describe a culture that views young people, teachers, families, and communities as key decision-makers in how schools contribute to fulfilling the goal of improving communities, actualizing liberty and equity, and addressing seemingly intractable challenges. We ask four central questions throughout the book:

- What does democratic schooling mean in various global contexts?
- How do schools actualize liberty, equity, community, and collaboration in their local contexts?
- How do schools manage and evolve to meet the moment; reflect the voice, values, and goals of their communities; and draw on community resources and funds of knowledge?
- How does democratic schooling prepare students for an unpredictable future?

The book is organized by our four pillar framework for democratic education. We include existing schools and concept schools—those that are ideas but not in operation. Nineteen of the thirty-seven chapters include schools and concepts from outside of the USA. The first chapter includes the editors’ own journeys. The next four sections explore our newly developed framework. Although authors responded to more than

one pillar, we have grouped chapters according to the most dominant pillar. **Pillar 1** includes schools that emphasize the open flow of ideas and choices, regardless of their popularity. **Pillar 2** maintains that it's impossible to have a high-quality education that ignores equity. Chapters explore how many diverse "marginalized" communities experience education and some innovations that hold great promise for inclusion. **Pillar 3** provides examples of schools where active engagement, consensus, and compromise support the "common good." **Pillar 4** investigates schools which organize students, parents, social institutions, and the larger community collaboratively to achieve its goals and to solve theirs and society's most urgent challenges.

PILLAR 1: DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION EMPHASIZES THE OPEN FLOW OF IDEAS AND CHOICES, REGARDLESS OF THEIR POPULARITY

Students and teachers have the space to express themselves without limiting the rights of others. Democratic learning environments create safe and empowering spaces to enable all voices and perspectives to be heard.

Including every voice means providing ongoing opportunities to genuinely consider diverse voices, within boundaries of mutual respect and organizational coherence. This is illustrated in the chapter by Trinidad Aguilar, Bárbara Elmúdesi, and Rolf Hitschfeld, especially in how they describe the implementation of strategies such as dialogue circles and spaces for students to self-govern aspects of the daily activities in Kopernikus School (Chile). Many times, creating spaces for the open flow of ideas ends up leading communities to the realization that they are affected by systemic oppressions. In response, Cassandra Infante and Marianela Rivera claim that individuals and communities need to learn to transform into activists, an effort they have experienced through the HomePlace Collective in Lawrence, Massachusetts (USA). We also describe attempts to create spaces to build a democratic education in ways that are mindful of cultural and even spiritual differences, creating interesting opportunities to explore unsolved tensions and dilemmas. This happens in Fatima Aizaz's concept school (Pakistan) where she addresses ideas that are not commonly seen together such as the development of soul and academic growth. Similarly, Malak Arafa has designed a Community School intended to be Egypt's first socio-economically integrated, bilingual school.

Demetrius Fuller presents the HOMies, a novel framework that uses arts as a pathway for intellectual development and social justice, while Elizabeth Micci describes a concept school that uses theater as a model for an entire school (USA). Eric Gonzalez-Payne (Bali) founded the Empathy School, which aptly focuses on socio-emotional learning and the role of empathy. Adam Aronson (USA) describes his founding work with a group of young people whom many school systems have left behind. Etai Bar-Hanan shares his experiences as an educator and suggests, perhaps paradoxically, that national service in the military might be a democratizing force in Israel. Manami Okuda offers a critical reflection about Japan's traditional education system and Mo Kwok (Hong Kong) explores an alternative to over-academic mass education in China.

PILLAR 2: DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION IS A HIGH-QUALITY EQUITABLE EDUCATION AND IS ACCESSIBLE TO AND INCLUSIVE OF ALL PEOPLE

Democratic learning environments are rigorous, identity affirming, and culturally inclusive. These environments have an intentional focus on issues of equity and hold students to high expectations while respecting students' intersectional identities and varied cultural values and beliefs.

It's impossible to have a high-quality education that ignores equity. When those that are most marginalized do not have access to inclusive education all of us suffer. The need to foster systems that nurture all learners is well addressed in Abbie Cohen's chapter about community schools in the state of California (USA). This chapter offers readers a glimpse of a large-scale attempt to offer all students an inclusive and high-quality experience. The issues of equity and inclusion are also addressed in the chapter by Franco Mosso Cobián (Peru), which tells the story of a program aimed at developing leadership skills in high schoolers from rural and highly marginalized communities. Urvashi Sahni writes about how Prerna Girls School—managed by Study Hall Foundation in India—encourages young girls to prepare for and overcome the plethora of social discriminations they are likely to face in their community. Michael Lipset and Tony Simmons (USA) write a compelling chapter that describes the story of the High School for Recording Arts, a public charter school that has been working to re-engage out-of-school youth through the recording arts, hip-hop since 1998. Hannah Keen (USA) writes with one of her recent

graduates about the role of civic education and the arts. Shannon Norquist chronicles her journey (USA) in a school where one teacher is essentially *the* teacher for fifteen students. Carolyn Shadid Lewis writes with her young daughter about their experiences at Mission Hill School (USA) and Deborah Meier, school founder, writes the introduction. Finally, Dr. Deborah Lang Froggatt (USA) writes about the democratizing role of libraries and information literacy in schools.

PILLAR 3: DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION CONTRIBUTES
TO THE “COMMON GOOD” THROUGH ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT,
CONSENSUS, AND COMPROMISE

Democratic learning environments enable critical and compassionate dialogue, active listening, and reflection toward the advancement of society. Students and teachers develop the ability to communicate, debate, and synthesize multiple points of view to make decisions. The respect and protection of each other’s humanity and dignity is ever-present in support of a more just society.

This pillar includes an array of schools where teachers and young people are—or aspire to be—key decision-makers about aspects of their schooling that directly affect them and their learning experiences. These aspirations, with its setbacks and challenges, are described by Jeff Petty’s experience as principal of Highline Big Picture High School (USA). We also make the case that democratic learning environments embrace participatory processes to make curricular decisions about what students should learn and how. This is the case with the chapter by Carla Varas Flores and Francisco Madrid Vergara, where they explain how Escuela Ciudad de Berlin (Chile) opened spaces for teachers, students, and families to determine the extracurricular offerings and to support relevant changes in their school’s learning evaluation strategy. Similarly, Mirko Chardin (USA) documents the process of developing shared values with all stakeholders in a newly opened middle school. Isaiah Hawkins also explores the role that music and music education play in his thinking about a democratic model for musical instruction (USA). Margaret Cioffi explores the Walkabout concept and how active engagement can change the course of young people’s trajectories (USA). Luis Miguel Hadzich Girola (Peru) chronicles the possibilities for nomad technology-based learning units along the Peruvian Amazon, while Simon Murray gives us insights about the role of

schooling in the recently independent Seychelles during the 1970s. Grace Greenwald (Alaska) invites us to learn about a post-secondary learning environment, where storytelling and narrative are central components, especially for the Tlingit community. Lydia Cao's story about BirdHouse (England), a program providing families services to improve home-schooling, offers a more micro-view and personal way to respond to the demands of greater learning, greater inclusion, and the common good.

PILLAR 4: DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLS ORGANIZE STUDENTS,
PARENTS, SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS, AND THE LARGER
COMMUNITY COLLABORATIVELY TO ACHIEVE ITS GOALS
AND TO SOLVE THEIRS AND SOCIETY'S MOST
URGENT CHALLENGES

Democracies are collective projects. Collective decision-making structures, practices, and policies must be maintained over time and updated when needed. Democratic learning environments continually welcome and value all voices and reflect on process and outcomes, considering the challenges of our times and our unpredictable future.

We believe that by advancing examples of global democratic education we can begin to find solutions to some of the world's most intractable issues and also to communities' daily challenges. Schools alone can't solve the climate crisis, but young people attending schools that offer a curriculum and a pedagogy that intentionally builds on this challenge can make a difference, one community at a time. This is what readers will find in the chapters that share stories of schools deeply rooted in environmental and scientific education. Ariel Arguedas, Colleen Fugate, and Patricia Vázquez describe the Emiliano Zapata School in Las Placitas (Mexico), while Cicy Po writes about Baxter Academy (Maine, USA) and Buffy Cushman-Patz details the founding of the School for Examining Essential Questions of Sustainability (SEEQS) in Honolulu, Hawaii. In this pillar we see the critical role that arts and creativity can play in schools and in society. Kaitlin Pomerantz (USA) explores issues of sustainability in a new course she has developed that examines the role of matter in art education. Kim Berman's chapter documents the role arts learning spaces provided to South Africa's quest for democracy and social justice, a critical dimension to our understanding about how we can embrace debate rather than deny differences in perspective and opinion. Ángela Ibañez and Marcial Huneeus (Chile)

have turned schoolyards into learning environments with play at the center. Siamack Zahedi (India) describes the role that professional development has played in developing a school that seeks to play an empowering role in its community. Maw Maw Khaing (Myanmar) details the founding of a school where choice and agency still have a role, even during a pandemic and a violent coup. Przemek Stolarski (Poland) writes about the role of schools and teachers in the midst of war and its consequences. The young people described in these chapters, and the communities they belong to, hold the answers, perhaps still undiscovered, to addressing many of the forces currently crippling our planet. Young people deserve schools that can help them create a better society. This conviction is also at the core of a chapter written by high school students (USA), in which they share their experience opening relevant processes like teacher feedback systems to students.

In the closing chapter we reflect on some common themes that have emerged: designing, imagining, building, and leading democratic schools and learning environments is complex, difficult, and messy work. It can even be dangerous. Education goes beyond the school—it affects, and is affected by, everything swirling outside the schoolhouse doors. It is also enormously invigorating and rewarding. Rather than takeaways, we provide a summary of the tensions found in the chapters.

FREEDOM VERSUS CONTROL

Who has freedom? Who is in control? When and why? Is the school able to create conditions where young people and teachers feel that they are making important decisions about their learning and their participation in the life of the school? If teachers do not feel that they have control about questions of teaching and learning, will students feel compelled to learn?

STANDARDIZATION VERSUS CHOICE

What has been the role of standardization in curriculum and assessment and why? What might happen if more choices are introduced? Could students opt for options created by themselves and not for those typically made available by others?

AUTONOMY VERSUS TOP DOWN DECISION-MAKING

In the name of social mobility and social efficiency, we see policymakers arguing for more autocratic decision-making and many societies embracing such a rigid discourse. In the name of equality, all classrooms must do the same, be on the same page of the curriculum, and take the same test. But is that what people really need? Is there a role for autonomy? For choice?

COLLECTIVE VERSUS INDIVIDUAL DECISION-MAKING

What happens when the idea of “us” as a collective is embodied in classrooms and school? We hope this book has contributed to the growing field of democratic education, both in theory and in practice.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

*Linda F. Nathan, Jonathan F. Mendonca,
and Gustavo Rojas Ayala*

*Authoritarian schools and systems are fairly easy to control and
maintain, but democratic environments embrace dynamism.
Democratic schools are not static, but encourage active participation
leading to processes that are messy, complex, and rarely straightforward.
Democratic schools encourage independent thought and celebrate
humanity.*

Schools are a reflection of the society in which they are situated. The reverse is also true: society reflects the kind and quality of its schools. This book examines this relationship by looking at democratic learning environments across the globe in radically different settings.

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As of 2020, nearly 90% of the world's population has completed primary schooling (Statista Research Department, 2022). The past century, particularly the last two decades, has witnessed a proliferation of schools and learning environments across the globe. Education is considered to be both a "right" and "duty" of citizens in most countries. Globally, many citizens expect governments to ensure access to basic education (right of citizens) and citizens of most countries are mandated by law to attain education up to a certain level (duty of citizens) (Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, n.d.). Arguably, education is seen as a fundamental human right. In order to thrive¹ in society, to achieve well-being and one's potential, education is a key ingredient (Elvin, 1966). Moreover, education is often described as an indispensable ingredient for the social and economic prosperity to which most societies aspire (ibid.). All these factors explain why more children and youth attend school than ever before. Globally, there are over 1.3 billion school-aged children attending schools (Statista, 2022). This number is roughly equal to one-fifth of the world's population, and thus has enormous potential to determine the social, economic, and cultural parameters of growth and development in our societies.

The massive growth of literacy rates over the past two centuries from a mere 12% in the 1800s to currently over 85% reflects the power of education systems to equip individuals with basic tools to develop their full potential. With aspirations to build stronger economies and more democratic societies, the second half of the twentieth century saw literacy and math skills become a global priority. However, the issue of quality remains hotly debated, especially when addressing the dynamic needs of digital economies and the quest for social and economic equity. The World Bank has highlighted that even though access to education has significantly increased in most countries, being *in* school does not imply that children are learning what they need to in order to thrive in the twenty-first century (The World Bank, 2019). Hundreds of millions of children are unable to perform simple reading, comprehension, and mathematical tasks expected of their grade level and 90% of children in "low income" countries are

¹Taking PISA performance as a proxy for quality of learning, the association between income levels and achievement levels is clear. The richer the country, the greater the likelihood of students averaging higher scores than their peers in poorer countries. The goal of equity-oriented policies is not to arrive at equal results, but to minimize the likelihood of having students excluded from learning due to their background and identity.

anticipated to graduate without the skills required to thrive in the twenty-first century (Winthrop & McGivney, 2015).

The challenge today may be less about access and more about how we learn and what we learn. Furthermore, the skills of critical thinking, self-directed learning, collaboration, and effective communication—tenets of deeper learning—remain woefully under-developed. This results in negative economic and social consequences for individuals and societies. The recent report by UNESCO’s International Commission, “Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education (2021),” recognizes the power of education to reimagine why, how, what, where, and when we learn. It calls for educators and governments across the world to commit to an education that is “grounded in human rights and based on principles of non-discrimination, social justice, respect for life, human dignity, and cultural diversity.”

In the context of this book, this means a renewed focus on democratic schooling and learning environments. Here, the word “democratic” does not refer to “big D” Democracy in a parliamentary or governmental context. We are using the word “democratic” to describe a culture that views young people, teachers, families, and communities as key decision-makers in how schools contribute to fulfilling the goal of improving communities and addressing seemingly intractable challenges.

However, we recognize that the democratic vision is not always put into practice because we’ve never agreed on the purpose of education. Scholars and students, alike, wrestle with the goals of education: economic and social mobility, the importance of developing a participatory citizenry, learning to read, getting along with those different from you, finding hope, and more recently connecting with nature and the environment all compete as valid reasons to be educated. These varied goals also reflect disagreements about how to measure educational success or achievement. This is reflected in the current focus on high-stakes testing. For example, some believe that standardized tests are the only genuine measure of quality (Rothstein et al., 2008). This has often resulted in schools being places of reproduction and control in order to guarantee optimal learning (Giroux, 2020). Teachers and children are told what to do, what to learn, and even how to act.

Many of the authors included in this book maintain that education should be a liberatory experience (Love, 2019). Powerful learning occurs through debate and disagreement. Young people are encouraged to be self-directed. The teacher is seen as a coach not as a sage on the stage.

Learning is co-constructed by teachers and students. Power and control is distributed throughout the institution. Schools pay attention to equity and the voices and needs of all members of the community.

This book identifies and showcases schools and educational programs across the world that have been designed and implemented with the aim of creating spaces where students can learn rigorously, express themselves, and participate in building the society that they desire. We hope to inspire a movement of educators and school designers who will create more democratic schools and programs. Our aim is to provide a global perspective that can deepen our understanding of how we can continue to grapple with our uncertain future and, at the same time, propose solutions to current threats. Our authors are passionate educators, writing about what they have experienced and what they aspire to do, always in the hope of inspiring others.

THE GLOBAL NEED FOR DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

Today, our world confronts many evolving humanitarian challenges, and empowering all students to contribute their perspectives to solutions is a shared global goal. The scale and global nature of these challenges have created an urgent need for open communication, cooperation, equity, freedom, renewed community relationships, and a commitment to a common good. These are the cornerstones of a democratic education. The common good creates a shared experience in which all benefit according to their need, often referred to as equity. Schools can contribute to the common good by becoming places where students, teachers, and families develop the tools and capacities to positively engage in shaping the society to which they belong. We know that people have more access to knowledge and tools than ever before and yet, as the UNESCO Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education (2021) report reminds us, a “more peaceful, just and sustainable future” is still elusive. Schools and society need to re-write their “social contract,” advancing the common good (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021). Drawing inspiration from the report and from the experiences of co-authors from sixteen different countries, this book aims to empower fellow educators, as well as leaders from the public and the private sectors, to reimagine possibilities.

WHY THIS BOOK?

This book reflects the increasing demand for schools to better prepare children for the twenty-first century. Assuming there exists one K–12 educational institution for every one thousand people globally, educators will require the resources to (re)design seven million schools.²

Just as our authors come from a wide range of backgrounds, so do our three co-editors. Linda has been teaching a course called *Building Democratic Schools* at the Harvard Graduate School of Education since 2000. She also founded and led three different democratic schools in Boston, MA. In the fall semester of 2021 Linda received a note in her inbox from two students who stated, “There are so many of us from the Global South, and we need better schools—particularly schools that reflect democratic practices.” That was how she met Gustavo and Jonathan, two graduate students, both in their final semester working toward their Masters in International Education Policy at Harvard. Jonathan and Gustavo had experience working with large-scale education systems and schools as well as leading civil society organizations in India and Latin America, respectively. They knew the challenges involved in driving change in schools. And so, the idea for this book was born. The three editors came together with the sole purpose of creating a book highlighting the stories, experiences, and obstacles of pursuing globally democratic schools that would spearhead a movement.

OUR APPROACH: WHAT CONSTITUTES A DEMOCRATIC LEARNING ENVIRONMENT?

As we began our deliberations about this book, we focused our discussions on what constituted a “democratic” learning environment. We also reflected on how the concept of “democracy” can differ due to culture, political governance, gender, available resources, and philosophical queries related to individual and collective freedom. We discussed how in the Western world, freedom is often associated with individual liberty. In non-Western societies, freedom is a more collective endeavor.

As these tensions and questions emerged, we reached out to educators who might be interested in collectively creating a book about democratic

²This statistic was derived by dividing a number of countries’ population by the number of schools and this gave an average of approximately 1 school for every 1000 individuals.

schools. We invited over seventy educators, students, and leaders from eighteen countries to contribute their personal descriptions of the schools they have taught in, attended, designed, and led and the need for democratic schooling in their context. Once a large number of them said yes, we asked authors to respond to two questions: “What does a democratic learning environment mean to you/in your context? And, why do you consider your school a democratic school?” From the initial group of proposals, we received over thirty draft essays from a broad range of leaders. In addition to providing some context on the state of education in their country, these authors describe the initial motivations and missions that fueled the creation of their schools or organizations. They also reflect on the most relevant design decisions they made over the course of their involvement in their projects and share both the impact of these decisions and the lessons learned. Some authors participated with chapters about *concept* schools—schools that are still an idea and not yet built. All co-authors have participated as peer reviewers and thought partners with their colleagues by providing feedback to at least one other chapter. In addition, we engaged a few authors as our consultants to validate both the introductory and the final chapter of the book. The process of creating the book has been an opportunity to live by democratic values: we engaged the community of co-authors in several discussions and decisions.

John Dewey, an early philosopher of democratic schooling, centered the following in his work: democracy is how much people have in common, interact, honor differences, learn from listening, and find agreement (Dewey, 1916). Nearly a hundred years later, New Zealand’s former Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern at the 2022 Harvard University graduation, attended by Linda, Gustavo, and Jonathan, stated how in her experience leading a country, “We are richer for our differences and poorer for our divisions.” The schools, districts, and models outlined in this book demonstrate what happens when the conditions for a democratic conversation about designing schools and learning environments that include the voices of young people are created. For a year, we studied these experiences, learned together, critiqued one another’s ideas, and listened to our students. Through all this work, we built a framework to think, reflect, and write about democratic education. A contribution stemming from our aspiration to celebrate diversity as a way to search for and build a “common ground” big enough to fit students from Egypt and from Cambridge, Massachusetts.

EMERGENT FRAMEWORK FOR DEMOCRATIC LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

As our editorial discussions became progressively more centered on the contribution of our co-authors, we deepened our understanding of the tensions and challenges that emerge when promoting democratic education. Furthermore, as we explored the diversity of experiences from the book's co-authors, we realized we needed an overarching structure in which to ground the content included in the book. We wanted the chapters to “speak” to one another with some more coherence. With this in mind, we offered all co-authors a set of four central questions and a framework to guide their thinking and writing as they further developed their chapters. The questions were rooted in our years of work and experience, readings, research, and explorations as educators, as well as the courses that Linda had taught and Jonathan and Gustavo had taken.

BOOK'S CENTRAL QUESTIONS

1. What does democratic schooling mean in various global contexts?
2. How do schools actualize liberty, equity, community, and collaboration in their local contexts?
3. How do schools manage and evolve to meet the moment; reflect the voice, values, and goals of their communities; and draw on community resources and funds of knowledge?
4. How does democratic schooling prepare students for an unpredictable future?

The questions also helped us define an emergent framework for democratic learning environments. We concluded that these pillars need to be present to consider a school or program “democratic.” We also believe that the presence of this framework is a contribution to solving the debate of what constitutes “good” schools. The framework is not meant to be used in a linear fashion; rather, it is offered as an opportunity to explore and gather some consensus on key attributes for living and breathing the values inherent in democratic learning environments. As we continued with this project, these questions and the four pillars of the framework also became the tool we used to review our own work and to provide feedback to one another.

EMERGENT FRAMEWORK FOR DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLS

1. **Democratic education emphasizes the open flow of ideas and choices, regardless of their popularity.** Students and teachers have the space to express themselves without limiting the rights of others. Democratic learning environments create safe and empowering spaces to enable all voices and perspectives to be heard.
2. **Democratic education is a high-quality equitable education and is accessible to and inclusive of all people.** Democratic learning environments are rigorous, identity affirming, and culturally inclusive. These environments have an intentional focus on issues of equity and hold students to high expectations while respecting students' intersectional identities and varied cultural values and beliefs.
3. **Democratic education contributes to the “common good” through active engagement, consensus, and compromise.** Democratic learning environments enable critical and compassionate dialogue, active listening, and reflection toward the advancement of society. Students and teachers develop the ability to communicate, debate, and synthesize multiple points of view to make decisions. The respect and protection of each other's humanity and dignity is ever-present in support of a more just society.
4. **Democratic schools organize students, parents, social institutions, and the larger community collaboratively to achieve its goals and to solve theirs and society's most urgent challenges.** Democracies are collective projects. Collective decision-making structures, practices, and policies must be maintained over time and updated when needed. Democratic learning environments continually welcome and value all voices and reflect on process and outcomes, considering the challenges of our times and our unpredictable future.

A ROADMAP TO EXPLORE THIS BOOK

As we began to review the proposed chapters, the framework and its corresponding pillars served as an overarching structure to edit individual chapters and categorize them thematically. Needless to say, no co-author wrote their chapters aiming at prioritizing one pillar over another. In fact, readers will probably identify many of the four pillars present in the

chapters. We hope this editorial decision facilitates how readers interact and engage with the content of this large book and provides a coherent experience.

*Pillar 1: Democratic Education Emphasizes the Open Flow
of Ideas and Choices, Regardless of Their Popularity*

Including every voice means providing ongoing opportunities to genuinely consider diverse voices, within boundaries of mutual respect and organizational coherence. This is illustrated in the chapter by Trinidad Aguilar, Bárbara Elmúdesi, and Rolf Hirschfeld, especially in how they describe the implementation of strategies such as dialogue circles and spaces for students to self-govern aspects of the daily activities in Kopernikus School (Chile). Many times, creating spaces for the open flow of ideas ends up leading communities to the realization that they are affected by systemic oppressions. In response, Kassandra Infante M.Ed. and Dr. Marianela Rivera claim that individuals and communities need to learn to transform into activists, an effort they have experienced through the HomePlace Collective in Lawrence, Massachusetts (USA). We also describe attempts to create spaces to build a democratic education in ways that are mindful of cultural and even spiritual differences, creating interesting opportunities to explore unsolved tensions and dilemmas. This happens in Fatima Aizaz's concept school (Pakistan), where she addresses ideas that are not commonly seen together such as the development of soul and academic growth. Similarly, Malak Arafa has designed a Community School intended to be Egypt's first socioeconomically integrated, bilingual school. Demetrius Fuller presents the HOMies, a novel framework that uses arts as a pathway for intellectual development and social justice, while Elizabeth Micci describes a concept school that uses theater as a model for an entire school (USA). Eric Gonzalez-Payne (Bali) founded The Empathy School, which aptly focuses on socio-emotional learning and the role of empathy. Adam Aronson (USA) describes his founding work with a group of young people whom many school systems have left behind. Etai Bar-Hanan shares his experiences as an educator and suggests, perhaps paradoxically, that national service in the military might be a democratizing force in Israel. Manami Okuda offers a critical reflection about Japan's traditional education system and Mo Kwok (Hong Kong) explores an alternative to over-academic mass education in China.

Pillar 2: Democratic Education Is a High-Quality Equitable Education and Is Accessible to and Inclusive of All People

It's impossible to have a high-quality education that ignores equity. When those that are most marginalized do not have access to inclusive education all of us suffer. The need to foster systems that nurture all learners is well addressed in Abbie Cohen's chapter about community schools in the state of California (USA). This chapter offers readers a glimpse of a large-scale attempt to offer all students an inclusive and high-quality experience. The issues of equity and inclusion are also addressed in the chapter by Franco Mosso Cobián (Peru), which tells the story of a program aimed at developing leadership skills in high schoolers from rural and highly marginalized communities. Urvashi Sahni writes about how Prerna Girls School—managed by Study Hall Foundation in India—encourages young girls to prepare for and overcome the plethora of social discriminations they are likely to face in their community. Michael Lipset and Tony Simmons (USA) write a compelling chapter that describes the story of the High School for Recording Arts, a public charter school that has been working to re-engage out-of-school youth through the recording arts, hip-hop since 1998. Hannah Kehn (USA) writes with one of her recent graduates about the role of civic education and the arts. Shannon Norquist chronicles her journey (USA) in a school where one teacher is essentially *the* teacher for fifteen students. Carolyn Shadid Lewis writes with her young daughter about their experiences at Mission Hill School (USA) and Deborah Meier, school founder, writes the introduction. Finally, Dr. Deborah Lang Froggatt (USA) writes about the democratizing role of libraries and information literacy in schools.

Pillar 3: Democratic Education Contributes to the “common good” Through Active Engagement, Consensus, and Compromise

This pillar includes an array of schools where teachers and young people are—or aspire to be—key decision-makers about aspects of their schooling that directly affect them and their learning experiences. These aspirations, with its setbacks and challenges, are described by Jeff Petty's experience as principal of Highline Big Picture High School (USA). We also make the case that democratic learning environments embrace participatory processes to make curricular decisions about what students should learn and how. This is the case with the chapter by Carla Varas Flores and Francisco

Madrid Vergara, where they explain how Escuela Ciudad de Berlin (Chile) opened spaces for teachers, students, and families to determine the extra-curricular offerings and to support relevant changes in their school's learning evaluation strategy. Similarly, Mirko Chardin (USA) documents the process of developing shared values with all stakeholders in a newly opened middle school. Isaiah Hawkins also explores the role that music and music education play in his thinking about a democratic model for musical instruction (USA). Margaret Cioffi explores the Walkabout concept and how active engagement can change the course of young people's trajectories (USA). Luis Miguel Hadzich Girola (Peru) chronicles the possibilities for nomad technology-based learning units along the Peruvian Amazon, while Simon Murray gives us insights about the role of schooling in the recently independent Seychelles during the 1970s. Grace Greenwald (Alaska) invites us to learn about a post-secondary learning environment, where storytelling and narrative are central components, especially for the Tlingit community. Lydia Cao's story about BirdHouse (England), a program providing families services to improve home-schooling, offers a more micro-view and personal way to respond to the demands of greater learning, greater inclusion, and the common good.

Pilar 4: Democratic Schools Organize Students, Parents, Social Institutions, and the Larger Community Collaboratively to Achieve Its Goals and to Solve Theirs and Society's Most Urgent Challenges

We believe that by advancing examples of global democratic education we can begin to find solutions to some of the world's most intractable issues and also to communities' daily challenges. Schools alone can't solve the climate crisis, but young people attending schools that offer a curriculum and a pedagogy that intentionally builds on this challenge can make a difference, one community at a time. This is what readers will find in the chapters that share stories of schools deeply rooted in environmental and scientific education. Ariel Arguedas, Colleen Fugate, and Patricia Vázquez describe the Emiliano Zapata School in Las Placitas (Mexico), while Cicy Po writes about Baxter Academy (Maine, USA) and Buffy Cushman-Patz details the founding of the School for Examining Essential Questions of Sustainability (SEEQS) in Honolulu, Hawaii. In this pillar we see the critical role that arts and creativity can play in schools and in society. Kaitlin Pomerantz (USA) explores issues of sustainability in a new course she has

developed that examines the role of matter in art education. Kim Berman's chapter documents the role arts learning spaces provided to South Africa's quest for democracy and social justice, a critical dimension to our understanding about how we can embrace debate rather than deny differences in perspective and opinion. Ángela Ibañez and Marcial Huneeus (Chile) have turned schoolyards into learning environments with play at the center. Siamack Zahedi (India) describes the role that professional development has played in developing a school that seeks to play an empowering role in its community. Maw Maw Khaing (Myanmar) details the founding of a school where choice and agency still have a role, even during a pandemic and a violent coup. Prezmek Stolarski (Poland) writes about the role of schools and teachers in the midst of war and its consequences. The young people described in these chapters, and the communities they belong to, hold the answers, perhaps still undiscovered, to addressing many of the forces currently crippling our planet. Young people deserve schools that can help them create a better society. This conviction is also at the core of a chapter written by high school students (USA), in which they share their experience opening relevant processes like teacher feedback systems to students.

CONCLUSION

We know what good schooling (and learning and teaching) looks like, but schooling has become more synonymous today with containment, rule following, checking boxes, and doing homework. In a moment when COVID-19 consumed us, we thought schools might follow a different path. Most have not. A few have. We want to bring attention to those schools and learn from them.

Throughout the next pages of this book authors, many of whom are school leaders and founders, probe different aspects of our emergent framework, mindful of the fact that many of the historical debates about the intersection between democracy and schooling are still unresolved and nested in layers of social and cultural meaning.

We have included chapters that might offer a politically opposing view regarding the role of states, markets, individuals, and communities that are creating democratic learning spaces. Our hope is to preserve an open space to exchange ideas and views in a democratic way.

In order to expand the scope and reach of this dialogue, we decided to publish this book as an open access publication available to everybody

without any cost. Hopefully, this decision is also seen as in keeping with our book's democratic ethos.

The concluding chapter brings us back to our central questions and framework. It offers some key takeaways that we believe might help educators, leaders, and policymakers who want to engage in the democratization of their schools. We close with some new questions and tensions to explore through collective inquiry and dialogue.

The goal of this book is much like the course that Linda teaches that led to this project: to create a learning environment where everyone can feel and experience democracy through their direct work and participation. With that in mind, we hope you read the chapters with our questions as a guide. Importantly, we want you to learn, reflect, and imagine new possibilities to build democratic schools within your own community.

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PART I

Open Flow of Ideas



Kopernikus School: Dialogue and Respect for a Democratic Life

Trinidad Aguilar, Bárbara Elmúdesi, and Rolf Hitschfeld

INTRODUCTION

In education, some things can only be learned through lived experience. One of them is to learn to live with others in a democratic way. Democracy and school are interdependent. The school must be a model for the community it educates and for which it educates. It must be a place where children and young people feel that they are welcome, that they are needed, and that they matter. It must instill confidence in the idea that the good life they aspire to is attainable. Part of this good life is to understand that differences and diversity are assets, that the weak need to be protected, and that the rules and values that apply and are established together set limits to the selfishness of individuals.

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Democratic education also encompasses experiences such as celebrating together, traveling together, spending leisure time together, working together, and finding one's place in society. The values that a school aims for should be more than class or a subject. Independence and responsibility, solidarity and helpfulness, and empathy, affection, and compassion must be lived in everyday life. The future of civil society depends on whether the younger generation adopts its cultural traditions and values, including learning to understand and respect other cultures.

WHERE WE COME FROM

Kopernikus School (www.kopernikus.cl) is a private school located in Frutillar, Chile, a little town of 20,000 habitants, a thousand kilometers south from the capital city, Santiago. The town is dominated by the scenic views of the volcanoes, the Llanquihue Lake, the natural landscape, and by Teatro del Lago, one of the largest and most innovative theaters in the country. A total of 4291 students in Frutillar attend in 27 schools (12 public, 12 charter, and 3 private schools). As of 2022, Kopernikus School hosts 340 students from two to eighteen years old in 16 multi-age classrooms. Currently, Kopernikus does not implement any selection process based on academic achievements, family background, or personal characteristics. Every year we make important efforts to expand the grants we offer to the local community as well as to improve the quality of our special needs program.

The school was founded in 2014 by Nicola Schiess, a Chilean philanthropist that has promoted education, music, and innovation in this small town, the northern point of the Chilean Patagonia. Although Nicola did not come from an educational background, she was convinced that the new education should focus on the singularity of each person, creativity, and the connection with the world. To develop these ideas, she and the team that founded the school visited several schools in Europe, each one following different approaches and methodologies.

In Jenaplan she discovered exactly what she was looking for: a pedagogical framework focused on the experience of each child and open to innovative ways of teaching, where creativity and inter-personal respect are essential for students to flourish. With the help of a teacher and the former principal of Rosenmaar School in Cologne, Germany, Kopernikus School started the development and adaptation of Jenaplan to its Chilean context. "There is no Jenaplan school just like another Jenaplan school" states a

common phrase among schools that identify themselves with this pedagogical framework, because each school has to respond to their own environment and to the dynamic conditions of the society in which they belong.

ABOUT JENAPLAN

Jenaplan was developed in the 1920s in the city of Jena by Peter Petersen who was the head of the Department of Education at the University of Jena. Between 1960 and 1990 the pedagogical framework has been especially promoted and renewed in the Netherlands (Velthausz & Winters, 2014). There are more than 250 Jenaplan schools in the world, most of them in the Netherlands and Germany.

Jenaplan schools operate according to twenty principles written in cooperation with and for the Jenaplan Association of the Netherlands by Kees Both and Kees Vreugdenhil in 1992 (NJPV, 2022). These principles are also accepted by the German Jenaplan Society. There are five principles that define the concept of the human being for Jenaplan, five principles that define the vision of society, and ten principles regarding schools to act accordingly to the vision of humans and society.

About People

1. Every person is unique: there are no two persons alike. That is why every child and every adult has an irreplaceable value.
2. Every human being has the right to develop their own identity. This is characterized by independence, critical awareness, creativity, and a focus on social justice. Race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, social environment, religion, worldview, or disability should make no difference.
3. Every human being needs personal relationships to develop their own identity: with other people; with the sensory reality of nature and culture; with the reality that cannot be experienced by the senses.
4. Every human being is recognized as a whole person and, where possible, approached and addressed as such.
5. Every human being is recognized as a carrier and innovator of culture and as such approached and addressed as much as possible.

About Society

6. People must work toward a society that respects everyone's irreplaceable value.
7. People must work toward a society that offers space and incentives for everyone's identity development.
8. People must work toward a society in which differences and changes are dealt with fairly, peacefully, and constructively.
9. People must work toward a society that manages the earth and world with respect and care.
10. People must work toward a society that uses natural and cultural resources responsibly for future generations.

About the School

11. The school is a relatively autonomous, cooperative organization of those involved. It influences society and is influenced by it.
12. At school, adults have the task of transforming the aforementioned principles about people and society into starting point of their pedagogical actions.
13. In the school, subject matter is derived both from the children's world and experiences, and from the cultural goods, which are regarded in society as important means for the development of the person and society outlined here.
14. In the school, education is carried out in pedagogical situations and with the help of pedagogical tools.
15. In the school, education is shaped by a rhythmic alternation of the basic activities of speaking, playing, working, and celebrating.
16. In the school there is a predominantly heterogeneous grouping of children, according to age and level of development, in order to stimulate learning from and caring for each other.
17. In the school, independent play and learning are alternated and complemented by guided and supervised learning. The latter is explicitly aimed at raising the levels. In all this, the children's initiatives play a significant role.
18. In the school, world studies are central and are based on experiencing, discovering, and researching.

19. In the school, behavioral and performance assessment of a child takes place as much as possible based on the child's developmental history and in consultation with the child.
20. In the school, changes and improvements are a never-ending process. This process is driven by a consistent interaction between acting and thinking.

The basic forms of education according to the Jenaplan approach are as follows:

- Work—It is constituted by the formal and nonformal teaching-learning moments and by the individual work the students do while learning to be responsible and autonomous.
- Dialogue—We make ourselves heard and listen to each other in a respectful environment, where we can share, reflect, plan, assess opportunities, discuss challenges, propose solutions, etc.
- Play—Through play we recognize each other and process our own experiences.
- Celebration—In different times and forms, celebrations are instances to strengthen our own community and the sense of belonging.

These basic forms of education are different ways in which students can discover who they are, explore the world, and express themselves by being aware of the local and wider community they are part of. Based on Jenaplan's basic forms of education and principles, at Kopernikus School we have been working toward a democratic education. Often, people confuse democratic education with a place where every decision has to be voted by all, or as an organization with no authority roles to play. We see democratic education as one that teaches students to understand that they have an active role in building a school in which everyone's inalienable value and dignity have to be respected.

We know that in education there are thousands of beautiful frameworks like Jenaplan. We think that the potential for innovation is not in continuing to create new frameworks. When we think about democratic education, we go back to ideas first written at least a century ago. For us, the potential for innovation lies at the core of the consistent and systematic implementation and improvement of these ideas. Today, high-quality implementation is scarcer than good ideas.

Although it will not be possible to fully transmit spirit and the culture of Kopernikus School in this chapter, we will share a set of practices and actions that we think can contribute to the conversation on how to develop democratic schools that this book is starting.

MULTI-AGE CLASSROOMS

All of our 340 students attend multi-age classrooms that aim to be a space for learning and community life to happen. Just like in real life, these classrooms gather students of different ages, interests, and occupations. This is not common for urban schools in Chile, where the traditional structure of age grouping has hardly ever been challenged. Our students seem to understand why for us multi-age classrooms reinforce our expectation to deliver a democratic education.

At the beginning, I didn't really understand the need to combine 9th and 10th grade in one classroom, but as the months went by, I realized how much I learned thanks to it. The multi-age gave me many friendships and taught me to be a better leader and more inclusive person, since being of the older generation in the class made me notice a slight difference in terms of leadership. It also helped me to realize that it is not necessary to always be restricted to my age group and that was something I had very normalized,

indicates Verena Mies from 10th grade. Educating in multi-age classrooms is a strong principle for our pedagogical model, but it hasn't been a smooth path to explore. The Chilean curriculum is strongly determined by student's ages, which created the challenge of constantly adapting it to periods of three or two years of progress. This means our teachers need to develop ways of thinking about the curriculum that focus on larger portions of the trajectory than regular teachers in public or other private schools.

SCHOOL CIRCLE

According to UNESCO (2022) more than 246 million children and adolescents experience violence in and around school every year and Chile is not an exception to this. Currently, violence is being increasingly used as a way to respond to conflict, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, the development of communication skills emerged as a

priority. This is why we see the School Circle both as a skill development space and as a protective factor to reduce violence and promote well-being. We believe that if our students learn how to listen to each other properly and how to talk respectfully to others, then we will be able to move forward to other forms of healthy and democratic interaction.

The Circle is where we practice our dialogue skills, and where each one of our students feels at home and welcomed by the classmates and teachers who co-create our community. One of our main objectives with this class format is to get our students to feel confident and to secure a safe space for them to participate freely and interact with others with certain collective rules (Image 2.1).

In this modality, all of our groups follow some common guidelines to organize the time they spend together. One of the main characteristics of the Circle is that we all sit at the same level, everyone sits on the floor, and the teacher is included in the Circle. Another principle is that the students are in charge of leading the Circle, through a very simple structure they can use. They can choose between different roles and they can switch their preferences weekly. A very important role is the Circle manager, who controls voice turns. Other roles are the ones in charge of keeping silence and



Image 2.1 School Circle in the early childhood at Kopernikus

keeping time. Once a week they sit for forty-five minutes in this Circle of confidence and companionship and they talk about different matters like their weekends, their families, they go through the week and its main activities, and also talk about their daily life conflicts at school. Circles happen every week in every classroom. And it is one of the things that students and adults at school value the most. Although it is fair to say that getting to this perception has meant an important amount of perseverance, modeling, and also patience.

STUDENT PARLIAMENT

At Kopernikus, we dedicate many hours to conversation and dialogue. We are convinced that every problem or situation needs a chance to be solved through open and direct communication. We support the development of communication skills by opening up as many opportunities to practice the tool of dialogue as possible, both in academic and in nonacademic contexts. The student parliament is one of the most important opportunities. The student parliament is a group of students who meet every week to assess the concerns of their class regarding the quality of inter-personal relationships in the school. These students are elected by their peers, and they represent their groups for a semester. This group is guided by a teacher, but are the students the ones responsible for coming up with resolutions and agreements for the school community in situations like lunchtime, playtime, games, discipline, and others. For our students, student parliament represents the space where their voices matter. “We have four basic rules: always meet in a circle and act like a parliament, have a replacement for every member, achieve contentment of every member; objections must be presented as a ‘gift’ to the discussion, and elections are open, without candidates and campaigns,” says Florencia Riedel, president of the 9th–12th student parliament.

CHILDREN’S VOICE IN CLASS

The Jenaplan model invites us to be constantly aware that each one of our students is unique and has a whole world inside him/her that we need to respect and acknowledge every day. Over the years we have developed processes that aim to give our students real voice in some of the matters that concern them. Some of them have to do with school life and social issues, and others are about their classes and their learning experience. We

have realized that giving relevance to their opinion and allowing them choice amplifies the potential of their learning experiences. Sometimes, something as simple as choosing their seats can make a big difference. And other times, students can choose things such as the topic they will conduct their project on or the way they want to be assessed. When students make relevant decisions about when and how to proceed with activities that matter for their learning journey, they become more autonomous and motivated.

Twice a year, children meet with their homeroom teacher and their parents or tutors to talk about their academic performance of the semester. To do this, they have two inputs: the academic report made by the teachers and the *Diario de Aprendizaje* (Learning journal). The academic report includes comments from the teachers and their learning level in some of the activities that have been evaluated. Teachers do not assign numerical grades to students' work until 7th grade. Numerical grades in early years of school have few benefits and they can undermine intrinsic motivation and label students in an undesired way. This does not mean they are not evaluated; it just means that we give feedback with concepts which help developing a growth mentality.

The *Diario de Aprendizaje* is a record of our student's personal learning journey. Students complete their journal during the semester with notes, thoughts, drawings, sketches, observations, and information about their learning process. Our students use both inputs to self-assess their performance and define their goals for the next semester.

Building students' autonomy is a relevant aspect of our work and also one of the hardest. The COVID-19 pandemic and the long-term lockdowns we experienced during the academic years of 2020 and 2021 meant a regression in this matter. This has had effects on students' academic, social, and emotional development; thus, our latest efforts have focused on building this back as they are key components for school and life.

As we have seen during the last few years, empowering students, giving them voice and control about their learning process, is one of the most important ways to respect children's dignity and autonomy: two essential components of a democratic culture. Over the years we have come to learn that respect and authority are completely related to love and caring about each other (Image [2.2](#)).



Image 2.2 Students from 12th grade working with a teacher

BEYOND OUR SCHOOL

As part of its foundational principles and following the Jenaplan framework, Kopernikus has established the work outside the school as one of its cores, pursuing a strong agenda of collaboration among schools, teachers, schools leaders, and students. We have been able to do so mainly through both organized programs and spontaneous and emergent ideas coming up either from the Kopernikus community or from the other schools in our city—both public and charter schools.

Just while we write these paragraphs, we are collaborating with one of the biggest public schools in Frutillar on a pilot to adapt and implement the School Circles within their own school. Fostering spaces for dialogue—and the academic, personal and collective impact it has—arose as an imperative necessity for them evidenced by a socioemotional diagnosis developed yearly by the Chilean Ministry of Education. Every year, we make sure our students, teachers, and school leaders build horizontal relationships with their peers through academic projects, where they can collaborate in some aspects of the Chilean curriculum, extracurricular activities, and professional development. As any other school may agree, it

is not easy for schools to design and implement an inter-school collaboration agenda. It challenges timetables, it overloads the teachers' and school leaders' work, and it generally means more administrative work. But managing these difficulties pay off in greater opportunities to learn for our students and staff.

THE CHALLENGES WE FACE

Schools are complex institutions that face multiple challenges simultaneously. Developing democratic education at the school is one of them. And it is a fundamental one, especially considering that Democracy faces all around the world: fake news, polarization, mistrust in democratic institutions, social media, etc.

One of the biggest challenges we have faced (and keep facing) is teacher training. At least in Chile, teachers' initial training prepares them for a type of school that is no longer relevant for the challenges and opportunities our society and students currently face. We counter this by offering our teachers a strong learning community that works weekly to document practices and foster professional development. Still, we are very much affected by the problem of teacher dropout—a worldwide challenge we also face.

During the last years, we have realized that school improvement initiatives consume large amounts of time and energy. Just making sure our School Circles were in order took us a whole academic year. And, of course, this does not mean we are done, since we still need to constantly reflect on the practice and its impacts. We now understand that the best way to improve is to commit and be persistent, and to focus on the tiny details. Despite its size, once improvement initiatives start to work, everyone in our community knows we must work in synergy. And also in a way that tributes our democratic ethos.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

As obvious as it may sound, educating for democracy requires educating in democracy, which poses multiple daily challenges and innumerable greater benefits. The school community is the first “society” in which children participate and take part and this experience is one of the few which can confront to some extent the message of the large society. Democracy is not a given—not in schools and not in our societies. We, as school

leaders and teachers, were educated on a rather different approach to childhood and learning; thus, it requires for us to work hard on constantly rethinking our practices. The effort we put in pays off every time we see our students dialoguing their problems, looking out for solutions that may help others, respecting each other, and trusting their voices will be attentively listened and respected by every member in our community.

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Cultivating Democratic Learning Spaces: A Framework for Transformational Civics by HomePlace Collective

Kassandra Infante and Marianela Rivera

*“Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a **HomePlace**, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical dimension, one’s home place was the one site where one could freely construct the issue of humanization, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world”*
—hooks, 2017

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OUR ORIGIN STORY

HomePlace Collective (HPL Collective) is a civics education organization that helps educational institutions, community spaces, and nonprofits drive social change by building transformational civic skills and critical socio-political literacy. As co-founders, we fulfill our mission by providing professional development and coaching to adults that serve young people and are based in Lawrence, MA. Known for the Bread and Roses Strike of 1912, Lawrence has a rich history of labor activism that contradicts the present-day socio-economic and educational marginalization of the city and its people, where 21% of persons live under federal poverty guidelines (US Census Bureau QuickFacts: Lawrence City, Massachusetts, 2021). The city's public school system enrolls approximately 3000 students and has a student population that is 93.9% Hispanic/Latinx and 86.9% low income (Dept. of Elementary & Secondary Education School Profiles in MA, n.d.).

Where does the name *HomePlace Collective* come from? From the trail-blazing feminist scholar bell hooks and her exploration of the classroom as being a critical site of resistance. In her essay “Homeplace (a Site of Resistance)”, hooks speaks of the meaning of “Homeplace” as a site of resistance and liberation struggle. Schools are powerful institutions in that they have the ability to serve as a homeplace for students, a place of refuge and potential respite away from the negative social determinants of health and economic mobility that disproportionately limit Black, Indigenous, and/or students of color. HPL Collective views civics as the key to creating sites of resistance—resistance being the democratic tool that will allow students to reclaim their power and have a stronger voice in the civic and socio-cultural fabric of their communities.

Our dream of launching HPL Collective was born in 2021 after 10 years of experience working across various roles in education. The culmination of navigating policymaking, community engagement, and organizing spaces in which we noticed patterns of inequity that democratic schooling can address. Our unique vantage point as elected school board members under a state receivership allowed us to see how a system of power that was meant to deliver equity, in many cases exacerbated inequity through a lack of liberty and community input—stripping our hometown of its own power.

Pursuant to Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education state regulations, receiverships are an accountability measure for chronically underperforming schools that entails divesting all the

power and governance authority from the local school board and superintendent to a state-appointed receiver. How did the institution of receivership come to be, and how is it tied to our vision for HomePlace Collective? In order to answer this, it is important to understand the historical, socio-political context within the US educational system.

Educational reform initiatives over the last 20 years have promised to “leave no child left behind”, with policies that marry testing accountability measures with federal funding. As a result of federal and state test-based accountability policies, communities of color have been disenfranchised through state takeovers of underperforming schools (Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools, 2015). In November 2011, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education voted to designate the Lawrence Public Schools as “chronically underperforming” and place the district in state receivership. Holyoke Public Schools met the same fate in April 2015 as well as Southbridge Public Schools in January 2016. The common denominator between these three communities is their large Latino populations, making the receivership law a racist interventionist policy that attacks voter enfranchisement in a different way than is addressed in the Voting Rights Act. Rather than facing barriers to the ballot box, Latinos in these communities do not have fully empowered elected representatives on their school boards.

Serving on the school board between 2016 and 2020, families and students trusted us with their stories; there were the students who lamented being stripped of their library, the parents who believed their student’s special education rights were being violated, and the countless former students who were left wholly unprepared for the academic rigor of college, dropping out after facing the high costs of remedial coursework. As school board members, we aimed to serve the families that elected us, despite being disempowered by the receivership and having no authority to introduce or enact policy change that would have made a difference in the lives of these families and youth.

School boards or committees continue to be a major part of the engine that maintains and fortifies democracy in the United States. Parents and citizens are given the opportunity to elect local representatives who are tasked with addressing their community’s unique needs, and society as a whole benefits from the public good that having an educated citizenry provides. In addition, the school committee tends to be a major pathway to other elected positions, especially for people of color. Participation in school politics is a “catapult” for Black political power. Further, more

Latinos serve on school boards than any other political office (Morel, 2018). Therefore, any state action that limits or takes over that process while also disproportionately impacting communities of color is a racist action limiting a fundamental vehicle of democracy. The stories by families and youth showed us that, too often, youth internalize the inequities around them when inequities are in reality the result of bad policy rooted in systems of oppression that can be carried out through the receivership's insistence on the school committee not having community voice and power. In the instance of students being unprepared for the academic rigor of college, barriers needed to be addressed were systemic policy choices in nature, such as the availability of advanced placement courses. Students needed to be affirmed of the policy and systemic lens so as to not internalize perceived shortcomings in academic ability.

Currently, the three school systems in Massachusetts that are under receivership are among the communities with the lowest voter turnout. In 2020, while the state of Massachusetts set a new record with 76% voter turnout, Lawrence, Holyoke, and Southbridge saw between 53 and 60% (DeCosta, 2020). In addition, communities like Lawrence have seen a decrease in members of the community running for school committee. In fact, in 2015 the local paper reported that the Lawrence School Committee was in jeopardy of only having three members (one short of quorum and insufficient to formally meet) until Dr. Marianela Rivera stepped up to run.

The inability to propose and pass evidenced-based policy as disempowered elected school board members under receivership brought us to our own critical consciousness and the need for justice-oriented civics education in the classroom and community. From our vantage point, the intervention policy of receivership, while intended to increase student achievement, was also exacerbating inequities around civic empowerment. To face the educational inequities and injustices within the Lawrence Public Schools and beyond, we created the *HomePlace Collective* so that educators received the support and professional development needed to help students transform themselves, believe in the power of liberatory education, and shape necessary change through direct action and civic engagement.

DEMOCRATIC LEARNING THROUGH TRANSFORMATIONAL CIVICS

Through our learning journey, we believe that in order for schools and communities to create democratic learning environments as well as critical sites of resistance that actualize equity, liberty, and community and collaboration, they must lay the foundation for transformational civics for all students. Transformational civics happens when youth, and the adults that serve them, understand how to transform themselves and the systems around them toward social justice, as opposed to simply navigating the unjust systems the way there. In our work through HomePlace, we support educators in becoming *empowered advocates* in the classroom toward the liberation and educational freedom of their students. Being an empowered advocate means that teachers and parents own their civic power, both as individuals and as a collective, to more effectively create change. In our experience this looks like parents organizing themselves, and presenting to the school committee, to advocate for a culturally relevant curriculum that would reflect the racial/ethnic diversity in their own community.

Our work and experience in community have led us to believe that instilling transformational civics requires an approach on self and society rooted in the following pillars: **(1) developing an advocacy mindset and praxis, (2) classroom content and leadership, and (3) community/civic engagement.** The goal of the pillars is to equip educators with the content area knowledge, skills, and practices in order to not only deliver high-quality transformational civics-oriented instruction but also understand how the aforementioned areas intersect with institutional and systemic changes needed to effectively prepare students to liberate themselves and then transform society. The core idea is that one cannot transform society toward equity and justice until they've transformed and freed themselves.

Developing an advocacy/mindset and praxis means that educators should embrace and instill a mindset rooted in advocacy. This means that we see advocacy as a skill that can be developed, adopt a systems perspective, and understand the power we all have to effect change. This pillar requires self-reflective practices that build hope and agency while helping teams reach collective discovery. Enacting the first pillar looks like beginning professional development sessions with the opportunity to self-reflect around problems of practice, activities meant to explore our individual and team roles in social change, and developing an advocate mindset. We

embrace Anti-Racist-Anti-Bias (ABAR) as a holistic approach to self-reflection as it allows educators to understand how biases are rooted in systems of oppression ranging from white supremacy to patriarchy, ableism, and hetero-cis-ism (Escoto-German, 2021). Adopting an Anti-Racist/Anti-Bias mindset often also comes with intentional practice toward understanding one's own racial/ethnic identity.

Taking this pillar into practice, for example, educators can center advocacy in student's study of the past and present. They can build a lesson plan that critically examines the role that activists took in landmark policy change (such as the civil rights movement). Students would examine how everyday people took actions such as non-participation/refusal to segregate, sit-ins, protests, lobbying, and more to challenge the status quo that relegated Black people to second-class citizenship. Students would discuss the movement's efficacy toward long-term change toward equity and make comparisons to modern-day movements (such as Black Lives Matter). To instill hope and future action, educators could inspire students to dream of the ways in which they wish to challenge the status quo. In this example, teachers use their advocacy mindset to present advocacy as a multifaceted tool for social change.

This pillar's outcome for students is to cultivate critical socio-political literacy. Critical socio-political literacy involves making sense of the socio-political systems through which we live our lives and questioning those systems. The literacy component encourages readers to question, explore, or challenge the power relationships that exist between authors and readers—no matter the text. In the development of a transformational civics approach, literacy means more than teaching young people how to read text—it also means teaching students how to read the world since the act of reading cannot happen independently of the world in which the reader exists (Freire, 2017).

The second pillar of our framework, **Classroom Content and Leadership**, focuses on building content and classroom leadership with the goal of building equitable and inclusive spaces for political discussion and adding culturally relevant historical lesson plans that frame stories of resistance and positive advocacy. Through HomePlace, we provide professional development training that helps educators build lesson plans aligned to Massachusetts Learning Standards that infuse untold histories centering advocacy for justice. Using this approach, educators often find through-lines with contemporary social justice movements and pop culture that lead to enriching discussions and more engaged students. For example, in

Lawrence Public Schools, where the student enrollment is 97% Latinx (specifically of Caribbean origin), educators have found success in merging learnings about Caribbean histories of colonization through socio-cultural commentary in popular music from popular Latin music artists, such as Bad Bunny. In September 2022, Bad Bunny released his highly anticipated music video *El Apagon-Aqui Vive Gente* (The Blackout—People Live Here), an 18-minute documentary about displacement and other injustices his home island is facing. The call-to-action video was trending on social media and was an opportunity for educators to engage students in historical lessons about the colonization of Puerto Rico by utilizing contemporary art as an engaging topic of discourse to critique systems of power. In order to facilitate discourse around these topics in a manner which maximizes learning and empathy of the lived experiences of others, it is critical to build consensus around community agreements.

When engaging in conversations around difficult truths, it is especially important that classrooms begin with explicitly co-constructing community agreements and expectations that honor every student's lived experience and center their psychological and socio-emotional safety. Building norms also offsets the academic inclination to debate as opposed to healthy forms of discourse. Debate confers a power dynamic of winner/loser and right/wrong, whereas discourse affirms the multitudes of lived experiences our students bring into the classroom. Educators can create a culture of healthy discourse by beginning the year by co-creating norms, facilitating consensus/agreement among students during discussions, and referencing the norms when conflicts arise. In embracing the Classroom Content and Leadership pillar, educators will not only create safe and engaging learning spaces but also prepare their students for the discourse that happens in coalitions and public administration work.

As former Table Coordinators of the Greater Lawrence Education Justice Alliance (GLEJA) and as lead coalition facilitators, we utilized community guidelines to maintain a safe space for healthy discourse in our local coalition. Some examples of GLEJA's community guidelines included "one mic" (one person talking at a time); "take space, leave space" (state your point and then make room for others to share their perspective); and criticize issues, not people. From our experience, co-creating community norms and reviewing the norms as a living document that may be modified at any time at the start of every coalition meeting, helped to manage conflicts and disagreements each time they arose. In addition, when welcoming young people into the space, our norms equalized the power

dynamics to avoid issues of adultism and ensure that all voices were welcome in our discussions.

The third pillar, **Community and Civic Engagement**, is a natural progression toward action. Once students have developed the mindsets and have engaged in deeper learning around the topic of advocacy, they are ready to take action. Educators should feel a healthy sense of responsibility toward finding their highest and most appropriate involvement toward student's action planning. Within this stage, students are eager to learn more about how to embed justice at the systemic level, which often begins with policy levers at the local and state levels. In our experience within Lawrence, for example, youth have organized rallies against police brutality, petitioned and testified to the local elected leaders about budget transparency, a student bill of rights, proclaiming the second Monday of October as Indigenous People's Day, and more. In moving toward Indigenous People's Day, for example, it is clear that students deployed a critical lens to understand the root cause of colonialism and a need for more culturally appropriate redress. In some of these instances of youth organizing, youth's efforts were embraced under mayoral task forces, while other efforts have been underfunded and outright disbanded after drawing attention from a national perspective. These cases have proved the need to build an adult ally-ship and confront adultism with the young people they are serving, thereby honoring their desire to shape change.

One final strong example of facilitating youth action can be found in Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). YPAR is a youth-led approach to research that positions them as researchers of their own worlds and life experiences. Whereas social science research is typically conducted by formally trained researchers who oftentimes are not representative of the communities they are researching, YPAR is an approach that relies on youth expertise. This kind of research empowers students and places them in the role of experts in their own lived experiences. What also sets YPAR apart is the critical ontological lens and highlighting of socio-political context—there is no claim of objectivity/neutrality but rather an explicit aim to critique power in ways that are uplifting for participants and communities that have been historically marginalized. There are three principles guiding YPAR (McIntyre, 2000):

1. The collective investigation of a problem
2. The reliance on indigenous knowledge to better understand that problem

3. The desire to take individual and/or collective action to deal with the stated problem (p. 128)

Our experience bringing this research framework to life proved transformational for the youth involved. In the spring of 2021, we designed and launched an YPAR project with four high school students. Our research question centered on understanding how the system of power that was receivership exacerbated, if at all, inequities around postsecondary outcomes for former students of Lawrence High School. Our aim was to help our student lead researchers better understand the problem, an intricate policy designed to work toward the same goals we were questioning such as college readiness. We used arts-based research methods, such as photovoice, to give research participants the opportunity to visually answer our questions. This provided a space where many participants testified to feeling “healed”. Art-based pedagogies are healing because they help students envision what is and what can be while healing-centered engagement asks us to move away from pathologizing harm to fostering well-being (Ginwright, 2018). Upon completion of the project, our student researchers testified to feeling civically transformed and empowered—they went on to lead political campaigns and even changed their majors/minors at college toward politics.

The ultimate and long-term goal for HomePlace is to design and launch a community school informed by this kind of research. HomePlace proposes to help facilitate YPAR research projects to gain a deeper understanding of the social and educational issues students encounter across school systems and design a community school based on the collective findings. A radical undertaking such as this would place direct power in the hands of youth but act as a resistance strategy, in and of itself.

ZOOMING OUT: THE SYSTEMIC NATURE AND URGENT NEED FOR THIS WORK

Delivering transformational civics for students relies on a system that supports this kind of learning. While *critical sites of resistance* can be cultivated by individual teachers within the classroom and as a means for personal and community transformational, standards-based curriculum (that is often euro-centric), exclusionary discipline policies, test-based accountability measures, a lack of diversity in the teaching workforce, and an

inequitable funded public education system can all exist as systemic barriers to developing students into civic-minded democratic citizens. In our experience, delivering transformational civics to all requires fully supporting public education by tackling the aforementioned barriers through direct civic engagement, within the electoral system and outside of it.

For example, in addressing the achievement gap, we have collaborated with youth on advocacy campaigns focused on increasing funding for public schools. After tremendous advocacy efforts, the Student Opportunity Act (SOA) was signed into law in 2019. The act was by far the most significant update of the state education funding system since the Massachusetts Education Reform Act was enacted in 1993. The new law commits the state to achieving equitably funded public schools over a seven-year span. Once fully phased in, it will deliver \$1.5 billion in additional annual state aid to local public schools, with the bulk of those resources going to the schools with the greatest need: those in low-wealth communities serving high numbers of low-income students (Fund our Future, *n.d.*). This is an example of how collective civic participation, such as meeting with lawmakers, can lead to sustained systemic changes. Stories of collective wins like these remind us of why we cannot solely rely on intervention policies, such as receivership, to reach systemic changes our schools deserve. We must support and empower the full democratic participation of all communities toward their own self-determination.

Building transformational civics for all also requires policies, cultures, and structures that can face our country's legacy of enforcing systems of oppression and, unfortunately, the reality we face is far from that. In the United States, overwhelmingly conservative legislators tell a fear-based story of a multicultural and pluralistic society and a need to restore a monolithic elite form of democracy, rooted in oppression, from the past. This is evidenced in the curtailing of voting rights, the white supremacy backlash at multiracial progress (e.g., the insurrection of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021), and the stripping of democratically elected boards (such as receiverships) of their governance power. This effort has also manifested into concerted efforts to illegitimize the teaching of truth, as it relates to systems and history of oppression, via legislation and book bans within schools and libraries.

Between July 1, 2021, and March 31, 2022, 1586 bans were implemented in 86 school districts across 26 states. In the last year, PEN America counted 155 bills introduced in 38 states that would censor what teachers can say or teach in classrooms (Report: 1586 School Book Bans

and Restrictions in 86 School Districts Across 26 States, 2022). These bills and book bans largely target literature, training materials, and more that cover topics ranging from LGBTQ+, gender identity, and race, labeling these topics as inherently indecent, sexualized, offensive, and problematic. The overarching claim is that exposing students to this information will encourage them toward political extreme “leftism”. The evidence says otherwise: for example, research shows that LGBTQ students who attend schools with a curriculum that is inclusive of LGBTQ people, history, and events experience a better school climate and improved academic outcomes (GLSEN, 2011).

HomePlace rejects these claims as anti-democratic in a pluralistic society. Our classrooms must be spaces of resistance against these policies—policies that strip our students of life-affirming windows and mirrors that reflect their identities but also give nuanced perspectives of the world. When we don’t create these affirming spaces, we risk telling a dishonest and disempowering story of our country, therefore leaving us with little information to rectify how past harms are still hurting us today (Bishop, 1990). Our students deserve an inclusive curriculum that allows them to see their full selves reflected in classrooms and to learn about people who are different from themselves.

Since structural changes happen in policymaking, both at state and local levels, we must organize and educate against these measures, thereby protecting the educational and literary freedoms we experience as educators and facilitating for our learners.

OUR PATH FORWARD: SUSTAINING HOPE THROUGH CIVICS

In closing, HomePlace’s ultimate vision is for youth, and the adults that serve them can co-conspire together and transform themselves, believe in the power of liberatory education while building hope, and shape necessary change through direct action and civic engagement in their own communities. As historian Howard Zinn mentions, “we’ve never had our injustices rectified from the top; the important changes we’ve had across history have happened in reaction to social movements and advocacy”. We would not have diverse and multicultural classrooms had it not been for the civil rights movement and mass mobilization of people to push our policymaking institutions. Educators must prioritize preparing for the social movement of today while fostering the development of our youth’s critical thinking skills to ensure our students thrive in all facets of life in the

future. Contrary to the fears society may have in helping young people be more conscious of systemic injustice, researchers have found that building an awareness of injustice and participating in activist actions such as protest, community organizing, and/or more contribute to the overall well-being, hopefulness, and optimism of young people (Potts, 1994; Prilleltensky, 1996).

While it is essential to equip our students with the navigational capital skills needed to successfully navigate the world the way it currently exists, it is equally as critical to instill in our youth the transformation capital skills required to transform the world. The recent reckonings we've experienced collectively as a country in the last three years alone show the ties between the global health pandemic to the endemic that is white supremacist culture. Where there are reckonings, there are possibilities for change, and change cannot happen without a vision in hope. The time has never been more ripe to lean into the power of transformational civics for social change.

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CHAPTER 4

Alif Layla Arts Center: Dream, Explore, Act

Fatima Aizaz

PRE-COLONIAL EDUCATION

Pakistan is part of the region that is known as the Indian subcontinent and which has a rich culture of arts and literature going back thousands of years. Until the onset of British colonial rule, these traditional arts and forms of learning were a core part of the curriculum. *Madrasas*, Muslim centers of learning, for example, required students to acquire training not only in religious sciences, but also in logic, rhetoric, literature, astronomy and languages such as Arabic and Persian. Concurrently, there was a strong court culture of book and performing arts which flourished under Mughal patronage, resulting in not just production of music, art, poetry and dance, but also appreciation and respect for the art and the artists.¹ The teacher-student relationship was a central element of this education, and served not only as a means of transmission of knowledge, but also a “bridge that help[ed]

¹For further reading on art and Mughal patronage of it, please see Eaton, R. M. (2020). *India in the Persianate Age: 1000–1765*. London: Penguin; Schimmel, A. (2013). *The Empire of the Great Mughals: History, Art and Culture*. London: Reaktion Books.

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develop the moral, spiritual, and intellectual aspects of students” (Ashraf, 2020, p. 2). Moreover, education was perceived as a holistic endeavor, the purpose of which was to perfect one’s soul and character.

This tradition and system of learning was, in many ways, ruptured by the education reforms introduced by the British. In 1835, following Thomas Macaulay’s *Minute on Indian Education*, Arabic and Sanskrit schools were replaced with English ones, and graduating from these schools was linked to employment in the civil service. The new reforms also partitioned knowledge into strict subject categories, each distinct and disconnected from the other. The connection of education to lucrative employment opportunities brought forth a utilitarian idea of seeking knowledge whereby one acquired education and certifications for the sole purpose of securing a well-paying job. These reforms were also accompanied by reforms in the social domain, which introduced ethnic and religious categories, outlawed any non-binary gender expressions, and cracked down upon courtesans which were the bearers of traditional arts. This set into motion a move toward a colonial system of education that gradually started replacing centers of traditional learning, which began to be seen as useless and backward because learning these arts did not secure jobs. This also began affecting language learning; it was now English that was the language of government and offices.

Though democracy was far from being the norm in the nineteenth century, this education system heralded by oppressive colonial rule was farther away from the values of liberty and equality. It further oppressed disadvantaged groups and took away one of the few choices students had—choosing to learn for the sake of learning.

CURRENT CONTEXT OF (UN)DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLING IN PAKISTAN

In August 1947, Pakistan became an independent country, and like many postcolonial states, the country embarked upon an ambitious project of nation-building, which employed education as a vehicle for this purpose. Through national narratives on Partition, military dictatorships spanning more than half of Pakistan’s lifetime, and through instating Urdu as the national language, the Pakistan state attempted to craft a national identity that still continues to exclude minorities.

The recent curriculum reforms in Pakistan have made further attempts to exclude minorities, such as by eliminating certain minority writers' works from language curricula.² In both the political climate and the education reforms introduced, there is a significant shift toward centering an exclusive narrative of Islam that advances the dominant Sunni sect, incites hatred against minority communities and pushes away any critical voices. This is in addition to the fact that Pakistan has the world's second-highest number of out-of-school children (UNICEF, 2019) which can be expected to have increased after the recent floods. Collectively, these challenges present a bleak future of education in the country.

Of the 75 years that Pakistan has existed as a country, it has been under active military dictatorship for 33 years, with only one elected government completing its tenure. In current times, the military has moved toward more indirect intervention. Given that democracy itself has struggled to thrive in Pakistan, democratic schooling such as that offered by Sudbury Valley School³ is further from realization. The current landscape of schooling in Pakistan can broadly be categorized into four distinct systems—public, private, non-profit and religious schools. Public schools are funded and staffed by the government and follow their respective provincial curricula. Private schools can further be categorized into three according to income levels. Low-cost private schools charge a nominal fee and are mostly neighborhood schools following the provincial curriculum and cater to the children in the area. Middle-income schools are usually purpose-built and often offer both provincial and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) curricula. Elite private schools charge a hefty fee and offer either the GCSE or International Baccalaureate (IB) curricula. Non-profit schools are run by non-profit organizations filling the gap in areas where there are limited or no schools. While they also provide either free or subsidized education, they differ from low-cost private schools in terms of the quality offered. Finally, religious schools or *madrasas* offer only the religious curriculum which teaches the Qur'an, Arabic and other religious sciences. It must be noted, however, that while many students maintain primary enrollment at *madrasas*, there is also a large number that attend *madrasas* after school or for a few hours during

² For details on the curriculum, please see Single National Curriculum, Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, Pakistan.

³ For further reading, see <https://sudburyvalley.org/>.

the week to learn about the religion, but maintain primary enrollment in one of the other schools mentioned before.

In this landscape, problems such as corporal punishment, discouragement for asking questions, categorization of knowledge, standardized testing and a utilitarian view of education prevail which make democratic schooling more difficult. However, thinking about democratic schooling even in an ideal scenario in Pakistan where education is not beset by such challenges, such schooling would, in many ways, be conflicting with traditional forms of learning. I see this contradiction most pronounced in each system's view of the human being, and in turn, its influence on the student-teacher relationship. Traditional forms of learning in the subcontinent, such as but not restricted to *madradas*, have centered not the human being and their liberty, but a higher being or the soul, with the teacher serving as a guide on the path to achieving perfection. In this context, human beings exist to serve a higher purpose that extends beyond their growth, and the community or the collective holds immense value. Choice, as a concept, also becomes subservient to the higher purpose that education is supposed to fulfill.

ALIF LAYLA ARTS CENTER: PURPOSE AND VALUES

Given the context of democratic schooling in Pakistan, any democratic school would not only have to be equitable and responsive to socioeconomic inequities, but also center a purpose of education that extends beyond its utility, value the community and not just the individual, and provide explicit opportunities for critical thinking and discourse. In line with this, the purpose of education in such a space will be to perfect one's soul and further one's spiritual and academic growth. In short, it is to learn for the love of learning.

In building such a system of education, I believe that it is important to refer to systems and methods of learning that have existed in the region since centuries. There are a few small-scale initiatives working to develop such a model. One such example I came across during my research for this project is Harsukh, a school situated on the outskirts of Lahore, Pakistan's second largest city. With a clear focus on arts, music, literature and ethics, it also follows a model of learning that is closely linked with nature. Students spend a significant time outdoors, and there is also an organic farm in the vicinity of the school.⁴

⁴For more information on Harsukh, please see <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/740435-a-passion-project>.

Alif Layla Arts Center is a proposed non-profit learning space, planned to be situated in Karachi—the largest metropolitan in Pakistan. The name is inspired by *Alif Layla* (or *Alf Layla wa Layla*), known in English as *One Thousand and One Nights* or *Arabian Nights*. They are a collection of fantastical stories, which, for centuries, have contributed to the rich culture of popular stories and culture across different parts of the Muslim world. Popular stories such as *Alladin*, *Sinbad the Sailor*, and *Ali Baba and Forty Thieves* are part of the tales in *Alif Layla*, which not only represent a culture of storytelling but also offer a glimpse into the different ways of learning at the time. The aim of this center is to empower students to dream and to craft and tell their own stories by embodying the values of kindness, empathy, curiosity and justice. In the process, I hope they will end up creating magic for the world just like in *Alif Layla*. Drawing on the features identified earlier as most important for democratic schooling in Pakistan, *Alif Layla* will be a community-based arts center which will incorporate community knowledge into the education offered.

The school will serve high-school students in Machhar Colony in Karachi, where the research work for this center was conducted. Machhar Colony, literally Mosquito Colony, is one of the largest informal settlements in Pakistan and is home to low-income families. It is also home to a large population of undocumented migrants in Pakistan, whose children are unfairly denied access to education opportunities due to lack of citizenship (Maryam, 2021). Due to this, they can also not get admissions into schools which require birth documents for admission. These documents are extremely difficult to acquire if one is not a legal citizen of the country. This has given birth to a cycle of systemic oppression against a whole community. In recent years, many informal learning programs and centers have been set up to provide children a space to learn.⁵

ALIF LAYLA ARTS CENTER: HABITS OF MIND

In line with the vision of the center to empower students to dream and to craft and tell their own stories by embodying the values of kindness, empathy, curiosity and justice, the mission is to develop self-aware, empathetic and kind individuals who can be active agents of change in their lives and in their communities. I want to draw upon pre-colonial systems of

⁵ One such example is a recreational center run by Imkaan Welfare Organization. It provides children the space to play and learn sports. For more information, please see <https://www.imkaan.org/>.

education and attempt to identify and incorporate traditional ways of learning, teaching and studying art forms into a system in current times. To achieve its mission, *Alif Layla* will focus on inculcating four habits of mind, which, collectively, will be ways of developing the values highlighted earlier and will be embedded in every practice of the school.

Self-consciousness

I am defining self-consciousness as the capacity to reflect upon one's own self in relation to others, the community and the purpose of education. In the process of this reflection and value-creation, one will not only become more self-aware, but also become more cognizant of the values of the community, society, economy and the world at large. The purpose is to look inward and focus on the spiritual practice of cleansing the self. By being conscious and mindful of themselves and their identities, students will also learn to be more conscious of the identities and the inequities around them. Moreover, this process will also provide students the space to learn and practice being more intentional and mindful of their reflection and what they are reflecting upon.

Critical Thinking

I am defining critical thinking as the process of going deep into anything one engages with—text, image, conversation, etc. This is closely tied to the habit of reflection and self-consciousness because these habits require asking difficult questions of oneself, and critical thinking is prompted through thoughtful questions. Critical thinking will be integrated throughout the curriculum, the purpose of which will be to provide students the avenue to understand how narratives are formed, and what purpose some of these narratives serve. This is in the backdrop of hate speech and narratives taking center stage in politics and in general conversations. Such speech is usually targeted against minorities, and anyone questioning such narratives is also viewed with contempt. This habit of mind is essential in countering established systems of oppression and any other nationalist and right-wing narratives.

Active Voices Against Injustice and Oppression

An integral aspect of equitable democratic education is intentionally thinking about the community and identifying injustices and oppression around. I hope that *Alif Layla* students are not just mindful of the

injustice around them, but also actively thinking about countering it in whatever capacity they can. It is through this that they will become active agents of change in the present and not just the future and develop empathy and compassion.

Patience and Kindness

Here I am specifically referring to the Arabic and Urdu words of *sabr* and *hilm*, which roughly translate to patience and kindness. However, it is difficult to find an exact translation of these words, because these don't refer to the act of being patient and kind, rather to *being* patient and kind. *In this sense, it is a way of being and thinking, and not just a way of acting at a given point in time.*⁶ In action, this can translate to practices of active listening, taking time to understand and act upon instincts and judgments.

ALIF LAYLA ARTS CENTER: LEARNING AND CURRICULAR REQUIREMENTS

Given the mission of the Center, and the philosophy of education rooted in traditional arts learning, *Alif Layla* will require all students to complete four components—study an art form, study history of ideas, design a community advocacy project, learn a regional and a classical language, and learn a hands-on activity that requires the use of nature. Within the teaching of each of these requirements, one or more Habits of Mind will be integrated.

Study an Art Form

Students will have the option to choose from the following—book arts, visual arts, performing arts and community arts. Book arts include arts such as calligraphy, poetry, and writing. Visual arts include painting,

⁶The distinction between *acting* and *being* is important because the former often demonstrates one's relationship with the external world, while the latter demonstrates one's relationship with both the internal and the external world. For example, I may act patiently in a situation because acting impatiently might attract disapproval from others. However, if I embody patience in my *being*, I may act patiently even with myself and when there are no observers in a situation. One may be able to *act* patiently without embodying patience in one's *being*, but I struggle to imagine *being* patient without *acting* patiently. However, this distinction also brings up the question of whether both are mutually exclusive, which is a longer discussion beyond the scope of this essay, and requires further research and thought.

sculpting and weaving. Performing arts include music, dance and storytelling. Community arts may have overlaps with other categories and specifically include crafts that community members may be performing, and in some cases, these crafts might also be a source of livelihood. For instance, certain types of local textile and jewelry designs are crafts that have been running in families for centuries. This is not an exhaustive list but contains only some of the most popular art forms which have a long tradition and documentation of teaching and learning. At a minimum, students will have to choose one of the categories, but if a student wishes to choose more, they will be able to do so given that they will study at least one category in depth. In addition to their chosen category, if a student wishes to learn a specific art form from another category, they will be welcome and encouraged to do so.

The purpose of having this as a requirement is to provide students the space for creative pursuits which inculcate values of empathy and kindness. It is also to draw on ways of learning these art forms which require perfecting the inner spiritual state in order to perfect the art.

Study History of Ideas

A core requirement at *Alif Layla* will be to study philosophy. This includes primarily traditional philosophies and ideas. This will allow students to learn to think critically and the art of asking insightful questions. The purpose of this element is not to develop proficient knowledge about the various ideas and philosophies, but to use these as a tool of self-reflection and meaning-making. Students will be co-creators of this learning space. This is because a large chunk of the work is about centering the heart and the soul which are deeply personal endeavors. Teachers can only facilitate this process and not completely lead it.

Since the ideas in this class will be complex, it will be an ungraded class so as to allow students to fully and freely engage with the material. There has been significant research on the negative impacts of grading such as increased anxiety, feelings of low self-worth and avoidance of challenging courses.⁷ However, a 2017 study by Stuart Tannock explores the ways grading hinders democratic education. Tannock (2017) summarizes that

⁷For further reading, see Francisco, F. (1913). *The Origins and Ideals of the Modern School*. Watts & Co.; Dewey, J. (1903). *Ethical Principles Underlying Education*. University of Chicago Press; Dewey, J., and E. Dewey. 1915. *Schools of Tomorrow*. New York: Dutton; Fielding, M. (2005). Alex Bloom, pioneer of Radical State Education. *Forum*, 47(2), 119–134. <https://doi.org/10.2304/forum.2005.47.2.1>.

grading undermines democratic education in three key ways. First, it diminishes a sense of collective solidarity and pushes students to “embrace competitive and detached individualism” (Tannock, 2017, p. 1350). Second, it undermines critical questioning by “promoting relationships of passivity and obedience” among students toward their teachers (ibid.). Finally, it hinders students’ intrinsic motivation to be “independent, critically engaged and self-directed” learners (ibid.). Together, these reasons create learning environments that are fundamentally against the spirit of democratic societies, particularly against free and open dialogue. Therefore, in order to ensure that students critically engage with the content of this class, it will be an ungraded class. However, to ensure critical and independent engagement, a self-reflection element will be embedded in every lesson which will provide students the space to reflect on the ideas they engage with in the class, and on how those exist in their own lives. A final goal of the class will be for students to identify their purpose in life and how they are going to begin working toward it. Studying philosophy and ideas will provide students the opportunity to explore in depth different ways through which they can move toward their purpose, but the space to figure out if that works for them or they would like to rethink this purpose.

Design a Community Advocacy Project

One of the core requirements of *Alif Layla* will be a community advocacy project that will provide students the space to actively think of and implement solutions to common problems in the community. On one hand, this will generate civic awareness; on the other, it will provide a space to actively brainstorm solutions to critical problems posed to the community. For instance, a recent report predicted that Karachi will be completely submerged underwater by 2060 (Dawn, 2015). This news comes at the heels of urban flooding in Karachi that is becoming an annual occurrence now. While such issues are products of larger structural problems, there is also a dire need of community-led solutions to issues such as water conservation, waste management and deforestation, to name a few.

The goal of this requirement is to foster political discourse and dialogue within educational spaces and to empower students to become active agents of change within their circles of influence and beyond. Once students and teachers have initiated such projects and changes in their own communities, they will be prepared to advocate to and push the government and corporations for large-scale change.

Learn a Regional and a Classical Language

In addition to English and Urdu which are official requirements, students will be required to choose a language from regional languages, and a language from among Persian and Arabic. A significant element of language learning at *Alif Layla* will be the study of literary works in the language. These literary works will not only be modern but also canonical texts in the language. To understand the reason for this emphasis, we need to go back to the origin of the center's name. *Alif Layla* and other collections of stories and poetry such as *Dastan e Amir Hamza*, *Masnawi e Rumi* and *Gulistan e Saadi* are didactic texts. They are also fantastical stories which provide a great creative insight.

The goal of this requirement is to revive teaching and learning of local languages in K-12 education and move away from the hegemony of English and then Urdu. While few people understand Persian and Arabic, scripts of certain regional languages such as Punjabi are also dying out because of limited resources for documentation and teaching. The aim of this requirement is also to provide students the space to experience literature which may often be banned by the state.

Hands-on Work

Students will be able to choose from pottery and gardening, and in the process of learning, experience nature sensorily. The idea behind this is that manual work requires patience. Furthermore, intentionality during this process can connect the body with the materials being utilized and cause one to reflect on the origins of the materials and the connection of humans specifically with earth, and more generally with nature.

ALIF LAYLA ARTS CENTER: SPIRITUAL LEARNING REQUIREMENTS

The centerpiece of *Alif Layla's* mission is to develop conscientious human beings who are as mindful of their spiritual growth as of their professional and academic growth. Continuous and intentional reflection and learning play a critical role in this journey, which is why self-reflection is set to be a required component at *Alif Layla*. This will be facilitated in three ways—assigning of a Spiritual Teacher, embedding reflection time in the timetable, and providing time during the school day to critically learn religious texts.

Each student will be assigned a Spiritual Teacher, who would guide them through their reflection process. Their job will be to prompt and guide students' thinking through questions and insights into their journeys. Students will be sharing their reflections with the Spiritual Teacher, who would also remain in contact with the Arts and Hands-On Activity teachers about their mentee's spiritual journey and reflections. Arts and Hands-On Activity teachers are chosen specifically because these classes will provide students the space to consciously reflect upon their non-material purpose in life, and the space for meditative practices during the learning.

Weekly Reflection Time will be embedded in the timetable. This will be the time where students will record their reflection journeys in one of the following forms—journal, music, video and audio. However, they can choose to change forms depending on their needs, and they can also propose a different way of recording their reflections. At the end of each month, students will share their Reflection Journey with their Spiritual Teacher who will guide them accordingly. Once a month, Reflection Circles will also be held which will be led by the students themselves, with a Spiritual Teacher present as an observer and a facilitator if the need arises.

Finally, there will be time during the week where students can come together to learn a spiritual text. This can be according to their religious tradition or can be of another tradition. However, the goal is to provide students the space to reflect upon the texts and attempt to apply the learnings to their life. The aim is not to finish the whole text, but to focus on in-depth learning of all that they are reciting. This will also provide students the opportunity and the space to relate this to ideas they have explored in the Philosophy class.

CONCLUSION

Modern education systems are closely tied with economic systems because of their aim of providing workers for the economy. In this process of preparing workers, the pursuit of education has become an impersonal and a robotic endeavor which ends up perpetuating injustices that are common in any capitalist system. Moreover, this impersonal education also seems to have fractured students' relationships with themselves, their inner selves and their communities. With *Alif Layla*, I aim to subvert this and place spiritual and personal growth at the center of learning with the purpose of education to foster a love for learning.

In light of this, and given the context of democracy and democratic schooling in Pakistan, the mission of *Alif Layla* Arts Center is to develop

self-aware, empathetic and kind individuals who can be active agents of change in their lives and in their communities. This will be done through leveraging arts education and traditional forms of learning, while centering spiritual growth and learning. This is especially pertinent given the kind of challenges and uncertain futures facing Pakistan. I hope that this education will prepare students to be active voices and agents of change in their communities and their country, starting today, not tomorrow.

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Schooling in Egypt: Reimagined

Malak Arafa

“Bread, Freedom, and Dignity!” This chant reverberated through the streets of Egypt in January 2011. The Egyptian people came together, across socioeconomic differences, and religious and gender divides to imagine a more prosperous future for their country. The Community School seeks to recreate the diverse, unified and powerful “Egypt” that was created in Tahrir Square all those years ago. I was only eleven years old during the Arab Spring. Through the TV, I watched the seeds of hope transform my country. I watched as our once insurmountable differences melted away as hope bloomed. This imagined community that emerged in Tahrir Square gave me a glimpse of what could be. The power that emanated from the streets is a testament to what can happen when people of all socioeconomic classes and religions come together. It inspired me to design for diversity.

The Community School will be Egypt’s first socioeconomically integrated, bilingual school. I am designing this school with a community of teachers, students and parents. We are currently in the design and ideation phase. We are aiming to build a community, across socioeconomic differences, that is driven by academic excellence, community consciousness and critical reasoning. We are a school, a community and a family. Ours is an aspirational community, one that models what Egypt could and should

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be. Our school aspires to create a nurturing and challenging environment that enables our students to develop a deep sense of community consciousness that is rooted in empathy and critical thinking. Rather than being a school that prepares students for democracy, this is a school that democratizes education and focuses on democratic principles such as power from the people, justice and autonomy. The school intends to meet the need for a socioeconomically integrated, high-quality community school that reflects the people's desire for greater power, choice and self-determination.

This need became evident to me after I conducted a series of interviews with parents, students, teachers and community members. I started this process on my own in Boston, geographically isolated from my community in Cairo. I realized that without constant input from my community, my school design would be disconnected from reality. These interviews were, and continue to be, a critical part of the design process. My co-conspirators, as I have come to call them, provide me with insightful questions, pushback and support. The Community School has yet to be built. The hope is that it will be built within the decade. I invite your participation throughout this process.

AS OF NOW, WHAT DOES SCHOOLING IN EGYPT LOOK LIKE?

High-quality education today is concentrated in private, international schools that serve children from Egypt's most affluent families. Disciplinary standards at these schools lean on Western ideas of compliance and uniformity. There is little to no understanding of the vibrant local culture and how it is displayed in the classroom.

WHAT WOULD DEMOCRATIZED SCHOOLING LOOK LIKE IN EGYPT?

Mostafa and Haitham are both sixteen-year-old boys growing up in the same city, Cairo, but exist in realms that are worlds apart. Mostafa comes from a family that enjoys generational wealth. He lives in a large house in the fifth settlement¹ and has never had to worry about money. Haitham,

¹The 5th settlement is a new and affluent suburb of Cairo. It is located to the east of the Nile in a previously deserted area.

on the other hand, comes from a low socioeconomic status family. Haitham's father is a construction worker who receives a daily wage as opposed to a predictable salary. His father is responsible for feeding Haitham and his four siblings as his mother is unable to work. Haitham knows that his father worries about how he will be able to afford their next meal. Haitham takes a microbus to school while Mostafa's driver takes him and his younger sister to school. This split reality is a product of the immense income inequality in Egypt. Education in Egypt has been swept up in the neoliberal education movement. This can be seen with the growing demand for private tutors and private schools. Private tutoring has become an integral part of the Egyptian educational landscape, even in the poorest villages. The neoliberal conception of schooling, paired with the rising number of private schools in Egypt, exacerbates these vastly different experiences. Within the current system, Mostafa's and Haitham's paths would never have crossed. At our school, Mostafa and Haitham collaborate, will engage in meaningful dialogue and create a flourishing friendship that transcends socioeconomic divides. They will have open and honest conversations about class divides that are rooted in curiosity and empathy. These conversations will be difficult—unearthing generations' worth of resentment, anger and elitism. The purpose of our school is to help our students navigate these conversations and leave with a new perspective on the broader community. Our school expands their circle of concern, challenges them to become morally driven, community-oriented individuals and instills in them a desire to serve others.

Our disciplinary standards move away from compliance and uniformity toward standards that are rooted in an understanding of the local culture. Our hope for democratized schooling in Egypt is that it would be socio-economically integrated, anti-colonial and community-oriented. Not only do Egyptians want and deserve an education that fulfills their need for “bread, freedom and human dignity”, but they also deserve progressive, anti-colonial schooling that is rooted in the local culture. Our school intends to provide quality outside of these historical colonial spaces and actively challenge the remnants of colonialism in our mentalities and in our society. In terms of academics, anti-colonial education centers on local knowledge and scholarly practices as well as deep questioning of colonial ideas. The Community School will lean on local experts and engage with and challenge local knowledge-creation practices such as storytelling. With regard to school culture, our vision for anti-colonial education does not just look like the absence of colonial ideas and practices, but a

consistent focus on empowering the local culture. It also means that our students are able to fully embrace every aspect of the loud, argumentative, overwhelmingly friendly culture that resides within them.

With regard to academics, our school stands in direct contrast to the rigid, test-based public education that is available to most Egyptians. Public education is strictly tied to year-end examinations that determine whether students can progress to the following grade and, most significantly, what degrees they can pursue at the higher education level. These examinations require students to memorize and regurgitate content. Students are not required to synthesize, analyze or examine content or ideas. Engaging and collaborative pedagogies are reserved for students from affluent families who can afford to send them to private schools. Our school provides quality education that is open to families from all socio-economic backgrounds.

HABITS OF MIND

The academic focuses of the Community School are summed up in our habits of mind: collaboration, reflection, social courage and community embeddedness.

The first habit of mind is collaboration. Collaboration is a core tenet of democracy and thus central to our model of democratized schooling. In theory, each constituent in a democracy has equal power over the outcome of elections. However, only when constituents organize their individual power toward a collaborative effort does change happen. At our school, collaboration will be seen at all levels—in classrooms, between teaching teams and administrative staff. Students will focus mainly on group discussions and group-based inquiry lessons. They will be encouraged to collaborate both inside and outside the classroom in a variety of different settings. Schedules will be set up so that grade-level teaching teams have ample time to come together, share best practices and plan for the best learning outcomes.

Reflection is critical for accountability, another democratic principle that inspires our academics and whole-school culture. Reflective practices will be used to deal with disciplinary issues at all grade levels. Students will think critically about their choices and actions and be held accountable for their behavior. Academic deans will lead structured professional development sessions that allow teachers to reflect on what has been going well and what they can improve. As a wider community, we will come together

for reflective town halls every semester, to see how far we have come and where we still need to go.

Social courage is a habit of mind that several parents brought to my attention during the interview portion of my design process. Social courage, or شجاعة الأديبة, is the confidence to stand up for what is right, act upon our principles and speak up when it seems impossible to do so. The parents I spoke to during the design process stressed that our communities need morally grounded, courageous citizens and that schools were partly responsible for a child's moral development.

Community embeddedness is a habit of mind but also a way that the Community School actively tries to decolonize schooling. Focusing our academic and extracurricular endeavors on what is important to the community and the issues it is facing in the present moment allows our students to develop a nuanced, productive and empathetic understanding of their community. The Community School hopes to embed a sense of community consciousness in each of our students. This will be done through service learning that is directly linked to academic content. Community service is a cornerstone of the Community School experience. Community service helps students develop moral awareness and a social justice identity. Our academic programs fulfill our students' need for self-determination and power. Students can choose between a wide variety of courses that fulfill their graduation requirements. They also have the opportunity to choose how they wish to be assessed. Together, the four habits of mind come together to show what we expect of our students.

WHAT CHALLENGES EXIST ON THE PATH TO ACHIEVING DEMOCRATIZED SCHOOLING IN EGYPT?

There are many challenges to achieving democratic schooling in Egypt. My interviews with students, parents, educators and community members in Egypt have illuminated how deeply entrenched classism is in Egyptian society. Affluent parents were apprehensive about the idea of a socioeconomically integrated school for two main reasons. The first reason is that a core function of school for many families is to introduce their children "to the right people". For affluent families, "the right people" are those with economic and social power and privilege. The second reason is that affluent families believe that their values are distinct from the values of less-affluent families. One parent explained that she would be opposed to

a socioeconomically integrated school because she wants her children to be raised with the right morals and principles. This classist, deficit-based view of socioeconomically disadvantaged families is all too common and points to the urgent need for socioeconomic integration. However, many affluent and non-affluent families were enthusiastic about the idea of a socioeconomically integrated school and saw it as an opportunity to raise moral citizens. Using schooling to unite students across socioeconomic differences creates socially conscious, empathetic citizens that can help usher in Egypt's prosperous future.

Another challenge is the constraints of the political climate. The school functions within and embraces the constraints of the political climate. We are not advocating for the democratization of society, but for the democratization of schooling for the betterment of society. The democratized schooling that the Community School is modeling centers on increased access, autonomy and empowering students to be ethical leaders in their communities. Democratic communities and schools must reach an understanding of what the "common good" is. My co-conspirators and I have come up with the following working definition of the common good in our context: The Community School believes that "the common good" is achieved when we are all supported as well as challenged. The common good is achieved when students and teachers alike are able to grow through questioning and critical thinking. Most importantly, the common good is achieved when our community serves each individual regardless of socioeconomic status.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN FOR THIS DREAM TO BECOME A REALITY?

Creating a socioeconomically integrated school in Egypt requires designing for those least likely to be designed for. The biggest element of designing for the least likely to be designed for is family support. Flexible scheduling, meals for both students and families, transportation to many areas of Greater Cairo, and night-school classes for parents are just a few of the administrative features of the Community School that will allow us to fully support our families. Low-income households in Egypt are typically single-income households with more than four or five children. These families suffer from severe food insecurity, health issues due to improper sanitation and illiteracy among many other social and economic problems.

The Community School will support parents as much as they will the students. Our approach aims to be an all-encompassing, compassionate approach to families and students. This approach, however, requires a significant and consistent supply of capital.

The design and planning processes require an intimate understanding of how financial and social capital can influence power dynamics at socio-economically integrated schools. Real democracies have never had fully equal citizens. In order to democratize schooling, we must be aware of this reality and actively design to mitigate the effects of inequities in our community. Democratized schools are not utopias, but communities that actively strive to increase access and ensure equity.

Socioeconomic integration also requires a unique funding model. The Community School will have a sliding-scale tuition model but will rely heavily on external fundraising. A heavy reliance on fundraising ensures that our affluent families do not feel a sense of power over school decisions due to their larger financial contribution to the school. This model is the first of its kind in Egypt. This has not been previously attempted because there are no governmental funds or grants to draw on and the model must rely solely on external fundraising or private grants. This model is risky as it depends on the willingness and generosity of private individuals and companies as well as the ability of the school to attract higher-income families. However, stakeholders that we have talked to seem eager to contribute to a new model of schooling.

CONCLUSION

The Community School hopes to raise a generation that can continue growing our beautiful country. We will provide them with critical reasoning, collaboration and community-oriented tools that help them honor Egypt's history while bringing it into a new era. As we continue to collaborate with stakeholders, design and idea, we welcome your active participation in our school.

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The Hope of the HOMies

Demetrius Fuller

Every so often, as I walk the streets of Chelsea, Massachusetts, I run into a grown-up former student asking me if I still sing the “Brave Artist” song. “Yes!” I say, and for a moment we revel in a shared memory from 20 years ago, when they got an award for taking a risk and working with a mistake and wrote their name on our art room’s wall of fame. From the very outset of my career in small urban Chelsea, I noticed the tendency for some children to say, “I can’t draw.” This was heartbreaking, since children are naturally free artists. Something must have gotten between them and that freedom. So to preempt this, I developed the story of a fictional character called Ol’ Blue Face, who kept messing up, crumpling up their paper and throwing it across the room... Until one glorious day when they decided to turn their mistake into something new. Ol’ Blue Face reveled in a new sense of accomplishment and was finally liberated from the idea that art has to be perfect right away. In the story, the whole class cheered and put Ol’ Blue Face up on their shoulders. One shy student even made up a song on the spot. I called this the “Brave Artist,” and it’s

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been at the heart of every classroom I've ever taught. So after basking in our shared memory from years ago, I tell the grown-up former student, "You know, now we have more characters like the Brave Artist. We call them the HOMies."

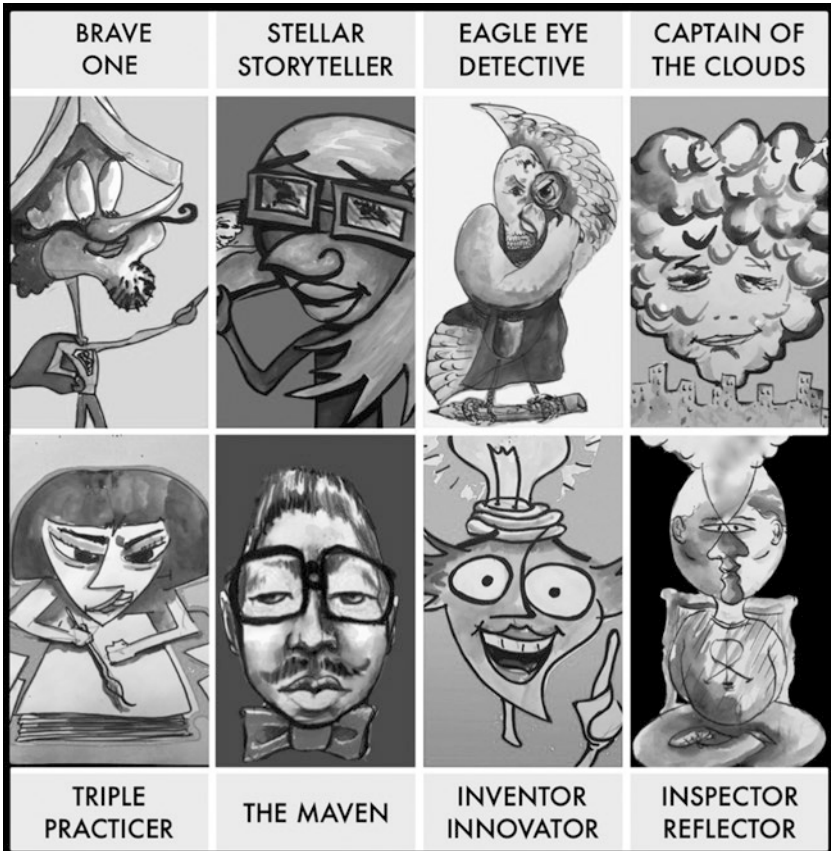
After using the Brave Artist for many years with great results, I wondered how I could reward other traits that were helpful to young artists. What about the act of creating something unique? What about the grit to keep refining and improving one's work? In 2010, I came across the book *Studio Thinking: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education* (Hetland et al., 2007), which identified eight habits of mind that artists exhibit and employ. Lightbulbs of recognition illuminated my mind. Inspired by that book, I expanded my characters to eight, calling them the HOMies, as an acronym for Habits of Mind.

Then, in 2014, two acquaintances of mine, a mathematics education consultant and a child psychologist, told me they were thinking of starting a math-art camp. Would I be interested in joining? The light bulbs in my mind brightened. For years, I had been tacitly exploring the intuition that learning math and learning art were similar in many ways. In my free time, I began researching this intersection, and we slowly began developing a math-art curriculum. I had long suspected that the habits of mind employed in art class were transferable to other subjects. After all, it isn't just visual artists that need to observe deeply and attend to patterns. We decided to call our program "Da Vinci's Notebook", and we used the HOMies as inspiration as we encouraged our students to find the connections below the surface of seemingly separate subjects. I even dressed up as "Neo Leo," the long-lost ancestor of the original renaissance man.

By now the HOMies have evolved and matured, informed by the Standards of Mathematical Practice, the Science and Engineering Practices, the ELA Common Core Portrait of a Graduate (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2017), and other frameworks from across the school disciplines. The HOMies are a set of eight characters that each embodies the shared habits of mind that writers, mathematicians, scientists, artists and others call upon in order to be successful in their field.

Whether we teach them or not, young people develop mental models of almost everything in the world. We can help make those mental models rich and flexible by explicitly teaching them and then repeatedly referring to them. The HOMies are an example of a mental model that is made to be memorable and relatable. They are meant to be internalized so they can act as a shorthand for the myriad aspects of learning. When we speak

about a child lacking “background knowledge,” we are often speaking about a lack of a sophisticated or appropriate schema on which to hang new information. As my principal said in one of our HOMies meetings, when looking for a way to clarify a new idea, a teacher or student could say, “I’m gonna hang it on this HOMie.” This way, teachers can leverage the background knowledge of the HOMies to enhance students’ understanding of which skill sets they are exercising in the moment. In this chapter, I will briefly describe each HOMie, how we have used them in my classes, and describe how my whole school is currently integrating the HOMies across the subjects. The eight HOMies are Brave One, Stellar Storyteller, Triple Practicer, Inventor Innovator, Captain of the Clouds, Eagle Eye Detective, Maven, and Inspector Reflector.



Being a **Stellar Storyteller** means using your subject to communicate an idea or feeling. It means you take the elements and move them around in an intentional way. This could be arranging the elements of a collage, a poem, or even a mathematical proof.

As an art teacher, my highest goal has been to empower my students to use art, how and when they want, as a tool for self-expression. I want my students to feel the same freedom and fearlessness I felt when, as a teenager, I would wander the streets of Hartford, Connecticut, or the woods of its suburbs, with a sketchbook under my arm, stopping to pepper the pages with sketches, words, and ideas. The quality of the entries is not important. What matters is the expression, the processing, and the forging of identity. In some ways, the Stellar Storyteller is the bridge to all the other HOMies. It is the way we find our voice. Working in Chelsea, Massachusetts, a tiny but over-crowded city with a high poverty rate, many of whose families speak another native language and have low social capital, finding this voice feels doubly important.

As the HOMies permeate into more areas of our school, several teachers have utilized the Stellar Storyteller to motivate students to effectively communicate. Our reading specialist now uses a customized version of the Stellar Storyteller in her student-friendly “Retelling Rubric.” We worked together to place images of the Stellar Storyteller into the existing rubric, as a toddler for “Not Yet,” a child for “Partially,” and a fully-grown Stellar Storyteller for “I was a Stellar Storyteller.” Another simple way that teachers are incorporating the HOMies into their existing lesson plans is by naming the HOMies in the objective. A recent 2nd grade example is: “I will be a Stellar Storyteller and explain orally and/or in writing how I represented and solved the problem.”

Throughout my 20-plus years here, I have seen relatively little change in the demographics of our classroom teachers and our students. I still look forward to the day when our students can take their rightful place as our replacements, becoming the teachers and the school leaders. In order to get there, the students must be able to communicate confidently, speaking truth to power whenever they need to.

The **Triple Practicer** embodies a growth mindset and a rage to master, working patiently to improve their skills. They know the importance of slowing down and giving their body a chance to learn new skills at its own pace.

By the time a rigorous picture of neuroplasticity developed in the first decade of the twenty-first century (Ericsson & Pool, 2017), most of us had already internalized a fixed mindset, the subtle (or not-so-subtle) notion that some people are just (for example) “math people” or “art people.” Like all our biases, this belief is largely subconscious (Kahneman, 2011). Without realizing it, we are reinforcing it to ourselves and our students on a daily basis. Teachers will sometimes tell me, when picking up their students, something like “I can’t draw to save my life.” The same narrative is common for mathematics. Somewhere along the line, many of us learned that it was safer to label ourselves out of trying something new. (We wouldn’t allow them to say I’m not a reading person. Why is that? This is one reason I often say that the HOMies are “secretly for the grownups.”)

When presenting a HOMie to a class, I share the “Key 3”—the three central aspects of the HOMie. Each one comes with a “Microchallenge,” a short activity to give the flavor of the HOMie. I’ve been told that they are fun, but surprisingly challenging. I repeatedly emphasize that the grown ups need to join in on the Microchallenges, so that the students can see them falter and work through difficulties. In a way, this is the “secret sauce” of the HOMies: Teachers and students engaged in a productive struggle with something that pushes them just a little out of their comfort zone. Triple Practicer Microchallenges include the “Mirror Maze”, in which folks must first do a guided maze drawing, and then go through the maze, looking at it in reverse with a mirror or phone. This reminds me of a YouTube video I saw of people trying to ride a “reverse bicycle,” which is made so that one must turn in the opposite direction one wants to go. The interesting thing about it is that it’s easier to learn if you don’t already know how to ride a bike. This feeling of awkwardness, where muscle memory can’t help you, is an important feeling for all of us to sit in regularly. It not only forces our brains to adapt and remain supple, but it humbles us, reminding us what it feels like to be a struggling student.

The **Inventor Innovator** uses the resources at hand to make novel connections.

I sometimes use the example of the birth of hip hop. In early 1970s New York City, the Bronx had been split by an expressway and blighted by urban renewal. There was limited access to traditional musical instruments, education, and resources. Parties and DJing were popular. One DJ,

Kool Herc, decided to just play the “breaks,” of a song, the funky drum bits without singing. His MC, Coke La Rock, decided to “rap” over the breaks. The crowd went wild (Chang et al., 2021). A new form of music was invented by working with these constraints and being open to novel connections (Kahneman, 2011).

One of the Microchallenges for Inventor Innovators is called “Go!!” Participants first draw (or trace with a coin) four rows of five circles. In just three minutes, they must try to turn each circle into something different. As with some of the other Microchallenges, we make a big deal of the timer and the pressure. This is aimed at building adrenaline and short circuiting the editing mind. There is simply no time to think about whether each idea is feasible or original. It’s just go go go!

One way of celebrating this type of divergent thinking throughout our school is through HOMie Badges. The Inventor Innovator badge, which is printed in color on cardstock, says simply, “I invented something new... I’m an Inventor Innovator.” When a student comes up with a new idea or way of doing something, the teacher can quickly give them a badge. It is important to note they can be given to a student who is not necessarily following directions. If we recognize this student in the moment in a really clear way, we are acknowledging divergent solutions, thereby expanding the limited definition of achievement that is consciously or unconsciously promoted in our school.

The **Captain of the Clouds** leverages the immense power of visualization.

In art class, we’ve always had the freedom to practice and champion visualizing things in our mind. But this is a superpower for all subjects! And it can be practiced and improved. Our visual memory is orders of magnitude better than our memory for words or names and is part of our inherited legacy: It has the potential to help us soar to new heights in mathematics, writing, and other subjects. Memory and imagination/visualization are two sides of the same ability, both using the same parts of the brain (Foer, 2012). Often when we are imagining something, we are combining images from our memory in novel ways (Mendelsund, 2014).

Frequently in my art room, I make up a story—something I know will capture the students’ attention, because as I tell it, I myself am immersed in and really *inside* of the story. As I have the students close their eyes, listen, and visualize, we are then imagining together. After the story is finished, I ask them to draw whatever it was they envisioned.

One of our former 3rd grade teachers, Will Chapman-Hale, describes how he uses the Captain of the Clouds in his classroom:

“Math word problems are a perennial struggle for elementary students. One strategy teachers can use to support students is to coach them in ‘Start / Change / Result’. That is, to see the problem as a story about a quantity of something in the mind’s eye: How much of something is there at the start of the problem? How does it change (e.g. is the amount divided equally among friends, or is some taken or given away)? How much is there at the end? When students get comfortable visualizing this sequence of mathematical events, they can start to use it more flexibly, working backwards from a resultant quantity and its change in order to derive the starting amount. Not only does this ground the problem in reality (connecting visual memories); it makes it approachable and even fun!”

As part of our whole-school implementation of the HOMies, my principal (a vital thought partner in this work) has added a segment to the morning announcements: Talk About A HOMie Tuesday, or TAHTU. In these, he briefly summarizes two of the HOMies, making connections to everyday life. In a recent TAHTU, he encouraged to be Captains of the Clouds, as he guided them in picturing a few HOMies.

The **Eagle Eye Detective** encourages us to look longer and more closely, finding nuance and details that others miss.

In my art class, we have a unit called “Zoom.” We first look at the work of Georgia O’Keeffe, projecting some of her large close-up abstractions of nature on the whiteboard. We then go outside, armed with jeweler’s loupes (short plastic tubes with small magnifying glasses at the end). Students disperse and wander around the small area of nature outside our urban school, “zooming in” on tree bark, insects, leaves, and other objects that catch their interest. This is usually an exuberant affair, as the students surprise and inspire each other by calling attention to things they never noticed before. We discovered that by putting a jeweler’s loupe in front of my iPhone lens, I can take pictures of what students find. We later project the image onto the white board.



After discussions about composition, students begin to crop and draw sections of their nature object using O’Keeffe’s work as a model. These become paintings and full works of art. Is this an “art lesson?” Is it a science lesson? Is this an “interdisciplinary lesson”? To me, it is deeper than that. It is a lesson on the habit of mind of looking closely, noticing what others miss. As with the other HOMies, this way of engaging with the world is not subject specific. I deeply believe we owe it to our students and ourselves to center such universal habits and approaches. We should model and practice the often skipped step of “just looking” in beholding any object of interest, be it a painting, a theory, Nature, a poem: It is the step where awe and inspiration happen.

In a first-grade math lesson, students were called upon to be Eagle Eye Detectives to find the “missing part” in word problems. This involves looking closely at what is there in order to find what isn’t there. This requires curiosity and interest, as well as patience and discernment, all key aspects of the Eagle Eye Detective.

Actually, it’s my father who taught me the value of the first step: **SIMPLY LOOKING**. He would linger in front of a single artwork for

over five minutes, in silence. In art class, we try to make time for this. I use a pointer to simply let the students' eyes "wander around the artwork like an ant." This seemingly inane activity is what I believe is missing in our wall-to-wall scheduling of activities. Reverence for what is there. Bare attention. The rest of the ladder of inference follows, ascending from naming, labeling, and narrating the work, but it all starts with just looking (Edwards, 2012; McGilchrist, 2012). Can we be brave enough to value and practice this in all subjects, from mathematics, to writing, to reading, to science to music... teaching. Really seeing our students as they are in the moment... to see the way, in a certain sense, that they are just perfect.

The Maven embodies deep love and knowledge of a subject. The Maven is passionate about a subject, and they relish learning the "tricks of the trade."

In art class, in our "Dream House" unit, we look at Chelsea buildings to get ideas for our own designs. This process reminds us that art and design are all around us, waiting to inspire us if we pay attention. Later in the process, students pretend they're real estate agents, guiding classmates through their architectural designs.

Here again, Will Chapman-Hale very eloquently describes how being a Maven is useful in reading and writing: "Author studies are a wonderful example of being a Maven. A literacy unit that studies the work of one author in depth enables students to understand the author's style: how the author uses language, or uses character development to convey themes, and what themes are important to the author. Students can try their hand at figurative language similar to the author's, or try to write using inner monologue to reveal a character's emotional journey. These practices reinforce the idea that it's not just ok, but encouraged, to study the professionals and try out their tricks in order to develop one's own skills."

One of my favorite parts about being an art teacher is getting to create art alongside my students. Is this authentic discovery less possible in other subjects, or have we just convinced ourselves that it is?

An **Inspector Reflector** is one who takes the time to look back at their own work or the work of peers in order to make it even stronger. They celebrate the iterative process of learning and creating, of revising one's work and taking feedback with a genuine desire to improve.

In art class, Zeinab's painting is up on the wall, and there are two other artists who have also finished. "Can you give Zeinab some advice?" I ask. Steven gestures to her painting and says, "I see you added shadow in the background... and... water..." I go on to say, "I had given her this black

oil pastel... I don't know if there's a place where she could use it..." Without touching the paper, he traces an area with his finger. Another student, Jared, interjects: "I feel like she should retrace these lines, so they make it... pop out a little bit." Zeinab takes her painting down from the wall, eager to act on this new feedback.

By now, the HOMies have spread to all classes in our school. All teachers are now explicitly using the HOMies in lesson plans, and students and teachers alike are shouting out the HOMies in themselves and each other. Recently, I taught the HOMies to whole-grade levels in the gym. To reflect upon and gauge their understanding of the HOMies, the students and teachers each completed a couple of HOMies matching tasks. We also discussed a few specific scenarios (from actual teachers). They included: "At school meeting I want to highlight community members or families that exemplify the blocks of success" and, "A student and I were browsing an atlas and she used what she learned from our conversation in her fictional story." As a group, we then discussed which HOMie each scenario best exemplified.

There has long been a social power asymmetry in my district: a virtually all-white, middle-income staff teaching a virtually all Latinx lower-income student body (though in the past few years, central office has worked hard to diversify the staff, with encouraging results). It has suffered from what I call "Boston Racism," which is a general, and perhaps unconscious, lack of respect for Black and Latinx people. The subtle racism of low expectations, the lack of surprise that things never change and the cordial silencing of original student voices, has historically kept our school and district quietly in the doldrums of low achievement and vague, barren ambitions.

In my school, we use a framework called the Pyramid of Success. This was developed by the famed UCLA basketball coach John Wooden. It encourages such traits as Loyalty, Determination, Hard Work and Skill. To be clear, the Pyramid of Success motivates and rewards countless students, bringing joy and a sense of belonging to our school. However, as is the case with many "character-building" frameworks, it is rooted in something like the American Dream. The thrust of the program is that students should be kind, follow directions, try their best and work together as a team. In fact, four of the fifteen traits seem to aim specifically at that: Loyalty, Team Spirit, Cooperation, and Friendship. This is an understandable focus for a framework developed by a winning basketball coach, but in the context of helping students develop authentic voice and agency so they can rise out of poverty, it falls short. Furthermore, when looked at

through the lens of the power asymmetry mentioned above, the underlying message and de facto effects of such “character-building” frameworks can appear at best insufficient, and at worst tone deaf or cruel.

The HOMies are intended to stand as a school-wide framework that acknowledges the character traits at the heart of learning: Actionable and inspiring thinking habits that students can embody in order to gain more agency and maintain their individuality in the face of a stark and stagnant power imbalance. So rather than going in the obvious direction of social justice lip service, the act of incorporating the HOMies framework into students’ everyday learning is itself a revolutionary process, because the HOMies get at the innermost frontier of social justice—the way the students see themselves, and the way the teachers are made to see the students. The HOMies empower by permitting the existing power within each student—their own innovative mind—to flourish, express itself, and be recognized.

Real equity means not short-changing our brilliant students by structuring out the place and space of discovery. The hope of the HOMies is that students can get excited about their own minds and that the adults can in turn gain not just excitement, but also humility toward their magnificent students. If we actually want schools to be incubators of genuine creativity, we have to first acknowledge that we do not know what it is. By definition, genuine creativity is the unknown—even to the adults (Ghiselin, 1985). What if our students are already wired for that genuine discovery? They’re the R & D department of the human race! (Gopnik, 2011).

This world is run by those whose stories prevail and by those who best leverage the languages. We all deserve to speak the languages of coding, mathematics, writing, history, art, music, and other subjects. I believe that what we want above all for our next generation is that they can express themselves with love and honesty, even in novel situations. A truly democratic school equips all students with the courage to use the subjects to express themselves and affect their community, to champion their own story and change the world.

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CHAPTER 7

The Globe School

Elizabeth Micci

One sticky summer morning in Vermont, I entered the barn where a professional actress from a popular New England theater company would be teaching a course entitled *Using Theater in an English Classroom*. The premise of the class was that the content of a traditional literacy course could be taught through the vehicle of theater and that the practices used to prepare actors for performance could be applied to making English instruction more hands-on, engaging, and memorable. The first instruction we were given was to abandon our desks. We could not, the teaching artist insisted, expect our students to do things that we were not willing to do ourselves. We would not be spending the next six weeks taking notes or engaging theoretically, but working through the literature and performance process in a way that we could mirror with our students. The final exam for the course would involve staging a theatrical production as well as developing a curricular unit. As someone with no background in the performing arts, who had heard of experiential learning pedagogical models but had no idea how to deploy one in an Advanced Placement English course, I came to understand that theater was literature on its feet.

In *Horace's Compromise*, Sizer (1984) asserts that among the incentives which draw adolescents to school, the “most powerful is tradition: one

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goes to high school because that is what one does from the age of fourteen to seventeen” (p. 59). It is saddening to think that attending school is so frequently perceived as a default position, similar to the way that many adults pessimistically view their presence at their job. Despite the fact that we spend most of our young lives in school and adult lives at work, these realms are quite often envisioned as separate from the spaces of the things we are passionate about. They are too often places for checking boxes, not for doing the things that bring us joy. Incredible learning opportunities are the ones that assist you in developing and fulfilling dreams and potential that you never knew you had. I can think of two instances—one in school and one in the workplace—where I was genuinely moved by my learning because I had the chance to apply it, to see myself becoming more efficacious in real time.

This is the kind of learning environment that I wish to cultivate and be a part of as both an educator and a learner. When I think about the investment needed to create buy-in around a project or organization, I consider the passion and care that drives a neighborhood to invest in a community theater. Community theaters are run on both individual and collective commitment. Most of the players in the space—from actors to ushers, stage managers to costume designers, set builders to board members—operate on a volunteer basis. Furthermore, these companies are capable of mounting incredible productions while operating under as many, if not more constraints in terms of time, space, money, and human capital than schools do. The productions are a labor of love for all involved and the theaters themselves are often beloved fixtures in their neighborhood. They become sources of energy and creativity in areas sometimes apart from thriving city centers and professional art scenes. I envision a school that provides something similar for its community—a space for inspiration and innovation that everyone can engage with, invest in, and be proud of.

The Globe School is designed as an independent micro middle school that would open with twenty-five students and be capped at one hundred. Democratic educational experiences rely on the ability of a program to meet the individual needs of its students, and while there is scale potential for a model like this, for quality purposes it would be critical to keep the community small at the outset. The school is not an arts academy or a school of drama, rather a program which utilizes the vehicle of a theatrical production to blend traditional pedagogy in the realm of advanced academics and arts education, community school practices, project-based learning, and narrative curriculum design to provide a unifying context for

the entire academic experience. Theater is a vehicle for creating rigorous, integrative curricular experiences that allow students to apply their learning to real-world tasks and critically engage with the world around them, increasing engagement, comprehension, and retention.

Schools are not capable of generating rich learning experiences just by existing. The educational environment I have in mind is rooted in the theatrical concept of a production; rather, of producing—learning how to learn in the process of putting something together. The model put forth in this chapter is one in which student learning is centered around putting on performances. In this domain, lessons are designed in the context of the plays themselves—for example, studying the history of the place and time in which the production will be set, engaging with mathematics through drawing up production budgets, creating art through the design and construction of sets, studying literature by examining characterization for performance, revolving science experiments around the production of special effects, and so on. I envision an environment in which learning is woven seamlessly with living and the student body operates as a legitimate company.

This model is designed with the intention of building effective measures of student learning and does not aim to eradicate all traditional metrics or expectations for what a school is supposed to do. It does, however, propose changing the venue. Arts have historically been employed in incredibly effective ways, not merely to supplement, but to teach core content. Strategies for using theater in the classroom have the capability to serve in both a remediation and an advancement capacity simultaneously. The experience of acting for my own English students was the experience of living and breathing literature, and engagement with my colleagues in other disciplines evidenced how other content areas might be similarly engaged. In such an exploratory, dynamic space, students are engaged in a constant cycle of discovery and learning.

One challenge in promoting such a model is divesting people of the idea that you need to be “artsy” or a “theater kid” to benefit from it. The closest thing I have experienced to interviews in my professional career is an audition. Producing a play was some of the hardest logistical and organizational work I have ever done, and it requires the kind of critical thinking and problem-solving ability that no traditional math problem ever came close to demanding. Stage management and directing have leadership built into the job titles, and all of the most important close reading and composition techniques can be taught through table work, character

development, script writing, and the creation of promotional materials. Because this school model has a service imperative built into its design, students would engage with the community to promote their work and the school as an access site for affordable art. By the time students get to their final stretch at the school, the aim is to have them generate original plays and run all of the production logistics themselves.

Ultimately, this proposal focuses on linking learning with both labor (production) and enjoyment (play). People are most successful when they are doing the things they love. It is through the pursuit of our passions that we carve out our place in the world. When students enter a grade level “behind,” the instinct in the sector is to continuously expose them to “back-to-basics” techniques that often fail to inspire great advancements in learning or make them competitive with peers that are operating in far less restrictive spaces which promote creativity and self-direction. The Globe School prioritizes creating authentic learning experiences for students which meet both traditional academic standards and the demands of a modern workplace that requires creativity and a well-defined sense of self to adequately navigate.

CURRICULAR FRAMEWORK

Each unit would be constructed around a production that the students would ultimately perform for the community. Initially, a teaching team with diverse experience in discrete content, theater arts, and curriculum planning would develop the units. The expectation is that students would progress to the point where they could write their own pieces for performance, design their own units around these pieces, and direct younger students through all components of production. The school would produce four plays in a year and students would be assigned one of four teams—the production team, the company, the technical crew, and the business team—for each performance. Over the course of the academic year, every student would have worked on each team.

To illustrate this idea, consider a unit designed around Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*. In its time, the play was highly controversial, and for this production, all the students would attend contextual seminars. That is, specialists—possibly from the design team, but preferably local university professors or historians—would teach them about McCarthyism and blacklisting. Where possible, the school would engage the world as an

extension of the classroom, perhaps with a trip to Salem, so that students could learn in a more impactful context than a lecture hall.

PRODUCTION

Students on the production team would be responsible for developing the vision for the play. This team consists of the students directing, producing, stage managing, and devising the vision for the set and costumes. They might begin by undergoing a book study in which they ultimately move past the plot and contextual information into a discussion of the play's major themes. What kinds of social and political circumstances led to both the witch trials and the McCarthy hearings? Are there situations in modern times when fear and paranoia drive people to break the rules of a democratic society? A critical component of the preparation and work of all teams would be engaging community members in relevant fields wherever possible.

The school might invite someone who works on devising concepts for movies or plays to help the team decide on the angle they want to pursue for the show. The students could choose to explore multiple themes for the production or hone in on one—perhaps the marginalization of certain groups in society. The design team could engage additional professionals throughout this discovery process, such as a lawyer to discuss due process and why the burden of proof is supposed to be on the court and not defendants. Discussions might also be crafted to explore morality questions (enter a philosophy professor) around “doing the right thing” and what choices the students themselves might make if their careers or lives were on the line.

THE COMPANY

Being on the company side of the performance would involve immersive acting training more like a standard theater course. Ensemble building activities and theater games might be standard fare within the school, but students focusing on performing in the unit's production would experience the most of this kind of exercise. The type of script study required for performance requires engaging with the close reading practices that are the backbone of literature classes but involves approaching literacy in a kinesthetic way. In addition to actual performance and elocution training, these students would do in-depth character analyzes and empathy

training, considering (in conjunction with the director) which of the many angles on their character they might want to take and writing reflections that provide a rationale for their preferred interpretations.

Another aim would be to expose students to as much theater as possible in this stage—perhaps reading plays across genres and attending performances of them. The design does not take for granted that the students will have any, let alone extensive, theater training. Their time in the company would also prompt students to consider how the work they are doing as actors might serve their future career—interviewing, pitching, collaborating, etc. Students in the company might also be exposed to the kinds of learning business students engage with in organizational behavior classes as being in a cast is the ultimate team experience. After each performance, the cast and production team might engage in a talk-back where they answered community members' questions about what they learned in the process of making the show, developing their character, etc.

TECH

If the semester a student spends on the production and company side of performances are slightly more literature and history heavy, their experience on the tech and business teams might tend a bit more toward the content of traditional math and science courses. This is why one student would travel between all four teams over the course of a year—to make for a comprehensive experience overall. Students might engage with local designers, sewing experts, hairdressers, and make-up artists as part of the process of devising what hair, make-up, and clothing would look like in the chosen time period of the production. Local architects and construction experts could be engaged as well as set designers to teach lessons on the mathematics involved in designing and building. Students working on this team would need to familiarize themselves with the vision of the production team and collaborate with them in order to design a set that embodies the focal themes.

They would also be part of the building process and might engage with lighting experts, painters, musicians, and sound techs throughout the process of determining the setting, lighting, and music. The act of generating a world for the stage also requires empathy work. The crew, in conjunction with the actors, could conduct interviews with individuals who were alive during the Red Scare or survey the community to find out how people feel they would respond to a difficult choice between the more noble

course of action and their own well-being. Additionally, interesting science labs could be developed around the process of generating special effects for the production.

BUSINESS

Work on the business team might begin with budgeting. What resources are necessary to make the production work? Where are the funds coming from? Financial planners could speak to the students about how to build and manage a budget, or the school might invite local business owners to share their budgeting practices with students. Another primary function of this team would be promoting the performance—e.g. coordinating with store owners for the actors to do a pop-up scene in front of a popular shop to get people’s attention, developing multimedia advertising campaigns. The productions would be inexpensive (if not entirely free) to the community, but this team might develop a program in which they sell advertising space to local companies.

The business team would also be responsible for marketing materials—production photos, headshots, helping the actors develop acting resumes—all things which, of course, they would first be trained in themselves. They might also be responsible for writing newspaper and online articles about the shows and managing the school’s social media platforms. These students might have lessons in accounting, economics, and marketing with the ultimate responsibility for understanding the school’s finances well enough to determine relevant budgets for the season.

The goal is to arrive at a place where older students work with the design team to develop curriculum, ultimately getting to a point where they are working through the challenges of running a small business on their own as the adults observe, facilitate, serve, and support as needed. How incredible would it be if community teachers and the design team ultimately became a plus, but not necessary because the more experienced students could teach the younger students the basics of putting on a meaningful performance and how to find the information that they do not already know. This school will be built on an empathy narrative but would empower students to decide with their unit design how that plays out—how they teach and learn with and within the community they are a part of.

ASSESSMENT

The performance review model of the school would require students on each team to sit down with their advisor in advance of every unit and set goals according to which team they have been assigned to. Because the school will initially house so few students, it is part of the advisors' job to really know the students' schedules and what the expectations are for them from the various instructors they engage with in each unit. In addition to debriefing the production overall, advisors would go through individual student's contributions to the production and the various ways in which the final product was dependent on them to be successful. Working on teams is often quite a motivating factor for students. It is one thing to receive an incomplete on a paper that only affects your grade, quite another to choose to skip an assignment that has implications for a larger group.

Additionally, there is learning in the process of understanding that meaningful work contributes to a context larger than oneself. This is a model that really battles "busy work." If what you are working on does not serve the production in some capacity, you probably should not be doing it. Assessment of a student in the company would look rather different than assessing a student on the tech team. For the unit on *The Crucible*, a student in the company might be evaluated on research they have conducted around the Salem trials and McCarthyism, artifacts (possibly write-ups) which reflect character analysis, video footage from different nights of the performance or from the beginning to the end of the rehearsal process to see how their elocution, empathetic portrayal, etc. has improved over the course of the project.

They might further be assessed on joint work with the production team who developed the concept for the production and on how effectively they engaged with the rest of the company as a team player. For their part, the production team might be assessed on, in addition to the research they do around creative interpretation, their organizational and management capacities. These latter qualities do not frequently show up on standardized tests, but they are integral to success in the workplace and if a student is to successfully and autonomously navigate a university setting. Such a model has the potential to prepare students not only to read and write better but also to become stronger leaders and take greater responsibility for their own learning.

Tech team projects could be less abstract—did you do the math or chemistry correctly in order to construct this set or generate such and such

special effects, etc.—but not necessarily. Perhaps they spend the unit cycle additionally engaged in studying aesthetics or psychology and considering how costume designs and the set will impact the audience emotionally. From there they might engage in a presentation or talk-back with the community after one of the performances around what they have learned and why they made the choices that they made. Through this process they would be assessed on the quality of their research, the application of that research, presentation skills, and how responsive they can be to questions based on the depth of their knowledge.

Similarly, for every concrete task the business team can be assessed on—their budget, their advertisements—there are so many other less concrete things that could be evaluated. Perhaps one student on the marketing team has set a goal with her advisor that she wants to develop greater tech literacy. One of the projects she might be assigned and assessed on is creating a video trailer for the performance that will be published on the school's website for marketing purposes. Perhaps another tells his advisor that he wants to be in charge of arranging the logistics around a promotional event. He could be assessed based on local participation in and response to the event as well as how organized he was in pulling it together from an operational capacity.

One way in which theater is a good vehicle for an academic unit is that there is a built-in assessment at the end—the production itself. From the standpoint of investment, I have found that when I employed theater even on a small scale in my English classroom, the plays were interesting motivational tools, even for the students who were initially skeptical. Note that these students, unlike those who would presumably attend The Globe School, had not opted into the theater experience in signing up for my course. But when I told them that a pop-up performance was going to be performed for freshmen, my senior classes invested more readily. Suddenly, an assignment with very few parameters yielded incredible props, elaborate costumes, innovative character interpretations, and choreographed dance numbers.

This is to say that if we are designing run-of-the-mill assessments because that is what we feel we need to police learning or ensure that students will invest in rigorous work, it is a poor excuse. There are much more engaging and creative ways of generating buy-in—whether it is by building peer approval into the outcome (quite resonant in the teen experience and at play in the situation above) or engendering a true passion for the activity. Standardized testing is an assessment model that allows for the

evaluation of many individuals in an efficient way. The production as an output is a much more nuanced assessment.

In Mehta's (2014) article on deeper learning, he uses theater as an example although he looks at it from a different perspective than outlined here. He thought about how theater programs operate like apprenticeships for a craft that exists in the real world and described how core subjects often fail to make their practice similarly relevant. With this model, I propose that theater might serve as a vehicle for making all subjects relevant. At the end of the day, a school is only going to be able to teach students a finite number of things. They might as well be things students really want to learn. Otherwise, with the exception of a relatively random smattering, students five or ten years down the line probably will not remember most of what they were taught. The Globe School seeks to generate a learning experience that is impossible to forget.

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Empathy School: A Democratic, Nature-Based SEL School

Eric Gonzalez-Payne

The seeds of Empathy School were sown a decade ago as my wife and I hitchhiked the world, learning how democratic education had taken shape in different cultures. Later, the roots of Empathy burrowed deep into the fertile soil that Harvard Graduate School of Education offered us. During the COVID-19 lockdown, as dark clouds of fear spanned the horizon, schools closed, and people fled. Empathy sprouted in Bali, Indonesia.

To us, democratic schooling has everything to do with empowering children to make decisions for themselves while also understanding and respecting the decisions of others. Through Social Emotional Learning (SEL), a high level of freedom and self-discipline, and the creation of meaningful and immersive Project-Based Learning, students will gain leadership and citizenship skills.

Empathy School was formed in 2020 in Ubud, Bali, Indonesia. We are a private/non-profit partnership with 100 students between the ages 1 and 14 from more than 40 countries. Our school families are 20% Indonesian and 80% digital nomads/expatriates/immigrants to Bali. Our

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classes are arranged by ability, not age, so it is common to find kids of different ages learning together. This has also helped us attract both kids who have fallen behind and academically advanced kids, as our system allows each individual to get customized learning support. On a typical day, students have classes in Social Emotional Learning, Math, English reading and writing, Nature Sciences, STEAM, 2D and 3D Arts, Sports, and Project-Based Learning.

Our campus is 8500 square meters of terraced land dotted with outdoor classrooms and hundreds of fruiting trees and bushes among vast rice fields that spread into the jungles and rivers. All the classrooms and furniture were built from local materials, including bamboo that grows in the jungle only meters from the school. Our artisans, gardeners, cooks, and cleaners come from the Balinese village that hosts us. When the school is not in session, the local community, both adults and kids, are welcome to use the school as a park—playing football, having a picnic, or just resting after a long day of work. Much of this is done because we know that a school is the heart of a community, so we must support and respect our host community. This has also meant that when there is a conflict, the community's goodwill can often help solve it.

We have various local scholarship programs to improve the English capacity of the village children. We are not yet able to offer full scholarships to local students. We are wary of doing so for young children due to the fear of eroding their native culture, which is very easy to do at younger ages and results in social isolation from the native community. When we form our high school, we plan to incorporate a sizable number of local children from our village. High schoolers would benefit from our programs while retaining their native cultures.

We have over 25 teachers who undergo more than 300 hours of training yearly. Our teachers run a quarterly Professional Development Training Seminar to train public and private school teachers and principals from around Bali in Nature, SEL, and Democratic Schooling techniques. We have reached hundreds of teachers around Bali, and our next training will be hosted at a public school, so we are very excited to reach far more teachers!

Since we have high expectations of ourselves and our students, we also parallel these high expectations in our community members. Parents are expected to be involved with their kids; join and lead seminars and parent gatherings; advise us on topics they are experts in; help to review this essay; and meet with the teaching and leadership regularly to discuss their

child's growth. Parents actively volunteer to meet and guide new parents to help them understand the school culture.

DEMOCRATIC IDEAS

You can see what a school values by seeing what it teaches and how it's members act. Through all that we teach and model, our kids become able to implement strategies to change their emotional state and be mindful enough to determine their classmates' emotions and understand the reasons behind them. It is from this that kids can understand the weight of their choices on the world and be more willing to participate in it. This skill development allows us to have a level of freedom and a level of Self-Discipline not common elsewhere. All students are expected to be fully mindful of their conduct and participate in mediation if they have a conflict; to support student-to-student mediation if they have the skills necessary; to transition between classes without teacher support as young as age six (each child has a unique schedule); to set class agreements; to vote on which group projects they would prefer to work on; and to respect the tools such as hammers, saws, forge, etc. which they regularly have access to.

BOUNDARIES AND CONSENT

Respect for boundaries and consent is a key value at our school. We recognize that everyone has the right to decide what happens to their body and to set their own limits. For example, if I ask you to mud wrestle with me, and we have plenty of smooth mud pools on campus, you could accept, or you could reject, but either way, I can accept your choice because I have learned boundaries and consent. Unfortunately, young children are still learning about these concepts. For instance, Riko first arrived at our school at age five, and he didn't understand the importance of asking for consent. He assumed that because he loved to play in the mud, other kids would too, and he sometimes pulled them in the mud without their permission. That didn't work out well, and soon I had two angry, mud-soaked, fighting children—all because everyone wants consent to what happens to them.

Throughout our day at Empathy, we rigorously instill these essential skills through morning circles, in our SEL classes, and often when a conflict arises (as many disputes arise from a failure to set boundaries or ask for consent). When there is a conflict, or any sort of need for emotional

support, students (teachers and parents are also welcome) can freely visit the “Peace Room” which is a dark, soothing, scented, quite, airconditioned environment filled with calming toys and beanbags and our Wellness team staff. This environment is very unique on campus and allows us to quickly change a child’s physiology, and thus gives us the opportunity to steer children into an emotional state more conducive to learning. Doing all of this dramatically reduces student conflict, allowing children and teachers opportunities to craft agreements to support everyone’s physical and emotional safety. In all my more than 17 years as a teacher, principal, and education director, I have not encountered an environment so low in conflict. I attribute this entirely to the teaching of boundaries and consent. We also teach these skills to our community through Non-Violent Communication (NVC) seminars and ensure we set clear boundaries with our community when they join Empathy. Through these lessons, we aim to create a safe and respectful environment for everyone at our school.

SELF-DISCIPLINE

In many traditional schools, students are expected to obey a teacher’s commands primarily because they fear punishment. At our school, however, we believe that true order can be achieved through self-discipline. We strive to cultivate an atmosphere that encourages students to reflect on their actions and make thoughtful decisions. We do this in three primary ways.

First, we strip the classroom of coercion tactics such as punishment and rewards. Instead of simply punishing a student for misbehaving, we take a more holistic approach. We ask the student to instead meet with one of our counselors to talk about what happened, why it happened, why society has a specific rule related to what happened, and what alternative strategy could be used in the future to reach a more desired outcome. By doing this, we help students to gain a deeper understanding of social norms and expectations. It is an arduous journey, but it grants a great deal of mindfulness around society’s expectations of children.

Another way we promote self-discipline is by removing all rewards from the campus so intrinsic motivations can flourish. In business class, YiFan, nine, fell in love with it, not because of the class materials, but because he sees how his efforts in class lead directly to a better quality of life for the small businesses he and the other kids have helped to grow. Similarly, in Math class, Vavara races to learn more, not because she wants a gold star

but because she knows she will be using these skills to measure campus with strings and her flourishing cartography skills. It is the long-term systematic removal of rewards allows kids to benchmark and observe their own personal growth while focus on the joy behind, and in front of, their work. By removing extrinsic rewards and punishment, we hope to create an environment where students can focus on the joy of learning and their own personal growth goals.

As the poet Rumi says, we meet our children in a field that is “beyond ideas of wrong and right.” Our approach to conflict resolution involves empathy and restorative justice circles to support our kids with conflicts. Children are taught how to listen to each other and explain from their perspective what happened. We focus on mutual understanding and long-term communication skill development. This has led to kids who expresses their anger and unhappiness in a manner that is so clear that conflict can be avoided and explored in depth.

A few months back, Eelco, a six-year-old, ran up to me. “Jeff hit Tav.” He panted and continued, “Jeff felt sad and angry when Tav took his eraser. Jeff has a need to keep his school supplies safe. But Tav felt excited when he saw the tiger eraser, because he loves tigers.”

Eelco then took me to the boys, who had already settled the conflict between themselves without any kind of punishment, just a deep understanding of themselves. This focus on mutual understanding and long-term communication skill development has resulted in children who can articulate their anger and unhappiness in a clear and constructive manner, helping to avoid and explore conflicts in greater depth.

Finally, we do Problem-Based Learning. For Primary, this is one hour per day. For middle school, this is all day long. Our projects are not simple, nor are they always expected to succeed. Failure can be a fantastic way to learn what didn’t work. In the PBL class, students’ activity discusses how to co-create rather than settle on compromises.

One example of this is our “Marbe Run” project, which requires dozen of children to build with sweat, tears, and even a few hammer blows to the fingers. Their pride beamed, yet it collapsed under the rain. The tears flooded, but they started again. This time it was bigger, better built, and more dynamic. And then the termites came, chewing up all of their love and passion. This time the tears were dry and the desire to rebuild was there. They scrapped it, removed the termite colony, and built it again. They argued, they listened to each other. They refused to compromise, yet they collaborated. Six months on they have a marble run that circles a

banana grove two times; it has twists, turns, funnels, tunnels, and most importantly, passion. The time spent planning and discussing together makes project time useful—regardless of the project outcome.

SETTING BOUNDARIES WITH OUR COMMUNITY

As a democratic school, it is vital that our community plays a crucial role in shaping and supporting our long-term mission. It is also imperative to us that the precise boundaries we set exist to distribute decision-making power to the right areas. For example, the Math director is responsible for the math curriculum. The principal is responsible for ensuring the quality of math teaching. Parents are empowered to support us, advise us, and guide us, but they know from day one that they cannot fire or hire teachers, nor can they set any curriculum. Through clear boundaries and the willingness to work with the minds of the many stakeholders, we can achieve all that we do.

PARENTS ADVISORY COUNCIL

The Parents advisory council is an empathy circle that does not include any members of the Empathy Team to ensure transparency and unbiased opinions. We believe that if we were involved in the council, it would be stressful for us (hearing problems and not strategies), and it would make parents less likely to speak the whole truth (by staying out, the reports they give us become anonymized). The council meets monthly and has very clear boundaries, and old members help new members understand our core culture and avoid making suggestions that go against our values.

The council has had many meetings, and their suggestions have been extremely useful and have led to improvements in areas of the school in which members may be experts or be very passionate about. A few results include new learning tools, ideas on improving on-campus safety, increased garden plant variety, we now teach survival (guided by parents) in science class, and support to create an app for the school.

While we value the input of our parent groups, we must maintain strict boundaries to ensure our core values remain intact. It is inevitable that there will be times when community members choose to make decisions or take action that cross stated boundaries. Yes, as leaders, we can and should review our boundaries, but we must also be clear to our parent groups that we will not quickly shift boundaries that go against our values.

SUPPORTING OUR WIDER COMMUNITY

We regularly meet with our local community leaders to see how we can find new ways to collaborate. Be that a new programs for children, new ways to drive local economic growth or environmental sustainability, or just to find ways to improve the quality of life of everyone in our community. We enter into these meetings with no expectations, and with the mindset that we are not here to compromise but find a way to build something new and better together which will best meet all of our needs. It is from this mindset that we have been able to create a more just and peaceful community.

The teaching team created and leads our “Skill Share,” the largest professional development program in Bali. Every three months, our team invites public and private schools to join us and learn about education topics. We have covered many issues, from how to do Project Based Learning (PBL), to how to Use Non-Violent Communication in the classroom, to seminars on teaching the female menstruation cycle to young teens. The ministry of education, and a wide verity of NGOs support us in this project. We take this project on ourselves because we that if we truly want to make systematic change we cannot just focus on ourselves but spreading the seeds of change in all directions.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

Empathy is on the correct path, a path cleared before us by generations of scientific research into how young minds grow and develop. My sons (aged 2.5 and 9) attend my school, so student outcomes directly impact me. Every day I watch as my oldest son and his friends set physical and emotional boundaries with the games they play, and I smile wide as my youngest asks for consent to play with his friends. I am excited to see my sons grow up in this democratic environment where boundaries, consent, and self-discipline will help my sons to grow up to be kind, wise, and patient individuals and future leaders.

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Building Democracy Through Norms Creation: The Chelsea Public Schools, a District Revitalized

Adam Aronson

The Chelsea Opportunity Academy is a small, public, alternative school within the Chelsea Public Schools of Chelsea, Massachusetts, USA. The city of Chelsea itself lies immediately north of Boston, Massachusetts. At 2.5 square miles and approximately 40,000 residents, the city is the second most densely populated in the state. Chelsea is truly a gateway city, beaoning to many of the great waves of immigration since 1739, Chelsea's year of incorporation. Though 38% of its documented residents have immigrated from a multitude of other countries, residents of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras make up the bulk of its population. Economically, 20% of all families reporting to the 2020 census and 28% of the youth population in the city reside below the poverty line. Many more residents in the city remain unreported and without documentation, thus skewing the above data.

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The Chelsea Public School district has historically faced many of the same challenges that other urban school districts in the United States face. Many students are impacted by homelessness, hunger, and community violence. In the past, the district has been deemed an underperforming district and managed by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. At the district's comprehensive high school, during the 2017–2018 school year, the four-year graduation rate was 59% and the dropout rate was 8.2% (Massachusetts state averages were 87.9% and 1.9%, respectively). Since Chelsea Public Schools last left a direct management program run by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in 2005, the district has engaged in several, five-year cycles of planning, revision, and revitalization.

FLEXIBILITY AND RELATIONSHIPS: THE CHELSEA OPPORTUNITY ACADEMY (COA) IS BORN

As part of the Chelsea Public Schools' long-term goal of decreasing the dropout rate and increasing the four-year graduation rate for all students, the district created a team in 2010 to study the reasons why students drop out of high school, learn more about preventative strategies, and begin planning an alternative high school to meet these district goals. Ronald Schmidt was a member of the original data team, the leader of the school design team, and the Chelsea Opportunity Academy's Founding Principal.

SCHMIDT (Founding principal): Most schools with Chelsea's demographics participated in DESE¹ dropout prevention meetings regularly. Our data did not change. A grant was shared at one of these conferences. We applied, our team gained momentum, and eventually we were deemed a finalist. We created a very succinct profile of a Chelsea High School (CHS) dropout—an 18-year-old male from Central America, less than two years in the country, significant gaps in their education, ELL learner, with a high trauma past. What they needed from a school—flexibility and caring adults.

During the 2017–2018 school, a design team composed of several students, families, teachers, administrators, support staff members, and central office team members worked to design and build a truly democratic school.

¹DESE—The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the state governing board of public schools.

SELA KENEN (Founding English Language Arts (ELA) teacher): I came on [to the team] in the middle of the year. It became a little crazy. We had 6 a.m. meetings. Based on our data, [the reasons students dropped out of Chelsea Public Schools] were work hours and feeling lack of community and lack of connection. Our Central American students often have a lot of financial responsibilities—remittances, debts for coming to the U.S., lawyers’ fees, rent, food. Also, students were often in big classes [at the traditional high school]. They felt that their teachers did not care about them or see them.

In order to allow for flexibility, the school would have a flexible schedule, have a curriculum that is accessible both online and in person, and assess all work based on mastery of academic skills. In order to create a caring and welcoming school environment, the team would focus on hiring staff with a demonstrated ability to build appropriate, caring relationships. This would ensure that all staff embody what Zaretta Hammond (2015) refers to as the “Warm Demander Framework” and utilize a student voice and opinion in all school matters. The first school design component to fully rely on student voice was the creation of school rules.

BUILDING VOICE: CREATING THE COA RULES

As the 2018–2019 school year began, thirty-seven students walked into their new school for the first time. The day began in a very different way. Instead of going to their first period class or homeroom, students and staff all filed into a large room and found chairs symbolically placed in a circle.

ANGELA BARRIENTOS (School Secretary): It was a community meeting. We get all together, students and staff, and talk about what is happening. We gathered in the room of the history teacher. It happens every Monday for the whole school year. It’s something new every week.

At this first community meeting, staff and students met as equals to begin the process of writing all school rules. Staff acted as facilitators and asked students what they wanted to create rules around.

KENEN (Founding ELA teacher): We asked our students to come up with the norms, what could be called rules [in a traditional school]. So we had students come up with norms around phone use, around going to the bathroom, around what they want to be called, dress code, food [consumption in classrooms].

Staff and students exchanged ideas and discussed past experiences with schools they had attended. They talked about the meaning behind rules and why they connect to learning.

ALVIN RIVERA (Humanities teacher): The school rules are a collaborative effort between staff and students where we set up standards, expectations where the students and staff work together during community meetings or side events where we come up with these standards and expectations for kids to follow throughout the year.

JJ Pina (Founding student, alumni): It is more so about us as students coming up with the school norms. It is about us voicing our opinions about how the school should run. [Creating the rules] makes me know what I deserve in an environment, meaning what I would want and how I would want things to be run. I have a say and I am in control. There is nobody to blame but myself if I don't follow these rules.

Students created categories of rules and then wrote out the definitions by hand. The collaboratively designed school's Cell Phone and Headphones policy is below:

- *Phone/Headphones If you have an important phone call, you can take it, but go outside the room. Personal responsibility—if your phone is distracting, put it away or ask a teacher to hold it for a while.*
- *If you are watching a video, put headphones in.*
- *If you have earbuds in, lower the volume or turn off so you can hear people talking to you.*

The discussion was different from those that students or staff had at their previous schools, and was not always easy.

JJ Pina (Founding student, alumni): Sometimes students were afraid to speak up and use their voice, say "Hey, I want this." They were afraid of people not agreeing. I feel like coming from a different school, given the opportunity to make our own rules was a positive thing, but it was different and new. [I got over it] when I realized I actually have a say and a voice at COA. I have control.

After several hours of deliberation and discussion, a new set of norms was created and a school culture of student voice, democracy, and agency was born.

BUILDING AGENCY THROUGH OWNERSHIP

From the very first minute spent in schools, COA students learned that their voice was paramount in their education. They learned, through norms and rules creation, that their voice mattered. School culture was radically shaped.

SCHMIDT (Founding principal): Students feel like this is genuinely their school. They care about it. They take care of it. And there is real ownership and then that transfers into the responsibility of what kids need when we talk to kids about other aspects of the school and what they need to do to be successful. It's a great balance of this partnership that I frequently describe when interviewing potential students about what it means to be a student here—that it truly is a partnership and we [adults] contribute and they [students] contribute and together we have formed a school that has worked for both the people who work here and the people who come here for [their] education.

RIVERA (Humanities teacher): The ways that it impacts our school culture is that it is much more democratic. When students have a say on the way the school is run or how rules or standards or expectations are followed, they have a stake in the game. When they have a stake in the game, this school becomes theirs. It's not just a vessel that they interact with every day as in a traditional school—isolated in their own desks and own minds. Here they are an active participant in their school and the school building process.

KENAN (Founding ELA teacher): It makes it less “do this because I said so.” It does not remove authority from teachers, but it places teachers in a role more like coaches. They don't look at us as though we are going to tell them what to do, but that we are going to be there to remind them what they have decided to do, that they think is going to help their learning.

Perhaps most importantly, there was a drastic change in the way students thought about themselves and their own learning. They began to have agency in their school and, in turn, their work. Teachers did not own their school; everyone owned a small piece of it. Teachers did not own their education, the students did. Nikholas, a student who transferred to the Chelsea Opportunity Academy from a nearby school, reflected on his experience:

NIKHOLAS (Current student): It felt different. I am from Boston. I grew up low key everywhere with a single mother. Two older sisters. My mom had more kids. Being the only kid was kind of rough. Once I turned 14-15 I lost the love of sports and got into the streets. I started doing things I wasn't

supposed to be doing. I was still in school. I repeated 8th grade and was kept back for my behavior. When I did my 8th grade year I got kicked out. I thought school was over with for me. My mom tried to sign me up for another school. I got kicked out of there too. I went to a third school. I got kicked out of there too. I went to another school, then COVID came. I lost a lot of friends and family around that time. I lost myself. Some months were bad, some months were sad. I lost myself in that big hole.

That's when I started living on my own. I moved to Chelsea. My family started talking to me about school. My first year at the traditional school was worse. A good friend of mine told me about COA months prior to that. I got in trouble at that school. I had an interview with COA that same day. I was scared to have the COA interview. I thought it was a regular type of school. I took it as a job interview. I was honest.

He then reflected on the agency he learned while thinking about the rules in the school:

NIKHOLOS DOE (Student): [When you break a rule,] you have a conversation. You retrack on that. Just go on. You have to own it. The rules here are great. You need to meet head to head with every teacher and staff member here to make your life great. They know me. They know who I am. They know my story.

INDEPENDENT VERSUS DEPENDENT LEARNERS

In order to fully understand the weight of the process of collaboratively creating rules at COA, it is important that we explore two key and connected concepts: independent learners and dependent learners. Though these two terms are often used in education, it is important to note exactly what we are referring to in this discussion. The difference between independent and dependent learners is not just how they learn, but what they learn—learning content versus learning about themselves. The following chart by Mynard and Sorflaten (2003) further outlines the differences between dependent and independent learners:

<i>Dependent learners</i>	<i>Independent learners</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rely heavily on the teacher • cannot make decisions about their learning • do not know their own strengths and weaknesses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are self-reliant • can make informed decisions about their learning • are aware of their strengths and weaknesses

(continued)

(continued)

<i>Dependent learners</i>	<i>Independent learners</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> do not connect classroom learning with the real world think that the teacher is wholly responsible for their learning do not know the best way to learn something 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> connect classroom learning with the real world take responsibility for their own learning know about different strategies for learning

In co-creating school rules, staff inadvertently pushed students at COA to become more independent in their learning. They provided space and a format for student agency and voice. Students in turn rose to the occasion. They reflect about the conditions that bolstered their own educational experience. They thought about their past school and rules that would help them in their current educational setting. They encouraged honest self-reflection. Because they felt a part of their community, they took responsibility for it. Because they felt ownership, it set the stage for enhanced learning. Here is the way students and alumni describe their experiences:

ISAAC MIDDLETON (COA alumni): It gives the students a lot more say and sort of power in how they dictate how they move throughout COA and how they act and I really think...So it sort of creates a guideline for students to follow for how students carry themselves while they are in COA.

JJ PINA (Founding COA student, alumni): I can make a decision and I do have a voice here and everybody's listening.

JENNY GUERRA (COA student): I feel heard and respected. I feel like I am not underestimated. I feel like when I get looked at by a teacher in COA they look at me like "Oh, she has potential and she can do it." We know ourselves and have to do our work. Overall, it's our responsibility to do what we have to do.

Teachers too saw the difference in student agency and learning throughout the school:

SCHMIDT (Founding principal): More than anything, it builds a relationship and changes the perspective of what school and education is all about because they come in with a really bad taste of what education is and how it has been a negative experience for them. It really switches that. Then they see that there are possibilities where education can be a place where they can thrive or where they can gain experience and it has value to their lives.

RIVERA (Humanities teacher): It makes them from dependent, isolated learners into fully engaged and transformational students where a kid who

comes in here who doesn't trust the system and teachers. Over time you see a transformation from a dependent learner to one that is creatively contributing to a blossoming school.

REFLECTION FROM THE SCHOOL

The experience of the Chelsea Opportunity Academy staff and students is a microcosm of the possibility of democratic schooling. Most educators who teach in the context of secondary education agree that the primary purpose of high school is to prepare students for what lies ahead after graduation. For some students, this may mean post-secondary schooling. For others, this might mean a technical vocation. Regardless of the path desired by the student, the new reality of our world is that solely learning content knowledge in high school is not enough to prepare students. Rather, they must also learn the skills necessary to drive their own learning after graduation. They must learn to be independent learners—to learn the self-reliance, self-awareness, and metacognitive skills necessary to adapt to the ever changing world.

Through the norms building activity at the Chelsea Opportunity Academy, staff and students saw the importance of student voice in their ownership of one aspect of the school. In a traditional school environment, students are informed of a set of rules created by many different stakeholders. Principals, school committee members, and sometimes teachers create a list of rules that must be listened to by students. Violations often mean strong consequences. Though there is an effort in many traditional schools to include more voices (such as parents) in the process, the most vital stakeholder is often not given a seat at the table—students. When students were given a seat at the table during the creation of norms at the Chelsea Opportunity Academy, they not only were given a space to develop their voice, but they were also asked to develop several major components of independent learning—including self-reliance, making decisions about their own educational experience, and taking responsibility for their own learning.

This first school culture activity rippled through classrooms as students not only enforced their own norms but took control over their educational experience. At the Chelsea Opportunity Academy, it is now common practice for students to not only know their progress toward graduation, but to select their path toward graduation. It is not uncommon for students to collaboratively create courses with teachers based on

their own best interests. Students provide feedback on teacher's classroom practices and regularly participate in the hiring of new staff members.

Alumni from the Chelsea Opportunity regularly report high levels of autonomy and agency in their lives post-graduation. Of the 106 graduates from the Chelsea Opportunity Academy, seven have been hired by the Chelsea Public Schools within four years after their graduation. Most report living financially independently and either attending a university, vocational school, or having gainful employment. Many have become advocates for their former school within the community. Though building school norms itself set a strong precedent for building school culture, the results of the activity had far greater reaching effects on student growth and learning. Students built agency and ownership. This agency and ownership lay the foundation for them to become highly functioning citizens in an ever changing global context.

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Motivation, Segregation, and Responsibility: The Challenges in Our Way to Grow Equal Citizens in a Democracy

Etai Bar-Hanan

...And you here, by coming to this rally... prove that the people truly want peace and oppose violence. Violence is undermining the very foundations of Israeli democracy. It must be condemned, denounced, and isolated.
—Rabin, 1995

On the evening of November 4th, 1995, a coalition of left-wing organizations led a rally in Tel Aviv, in support of the Oslo peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. Yitzhak Rabin, the Israeli Prime Minister, attended the rally, which attracted a crowd of more than 100,000 people. The above quote is taken from his remarks at this event. When the rally ended, Rabin walked down the Tel Aviv city hall steps toward the open door of his car, at which point a Jewish Israeli man fired three shots at his

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back with a semi-automatic pistol. The prime minister died on the operating table of a nearby hospital.

Since 1997, a day of remembrance has been observed annually to commemorate the life and the assassination of Rabin. By law, schools shall observe this day through activities highlighting the importance of democracy and tolerance in Israel, and the danger that violence poses to society.

Two years ago, during one of the COVID-19 quarantines, I dedicated a Zoom class with my 12-graders to Rabin and his legacy, on the national Rabin Memorial Day. At the end of the lesson, the students were to join a national broadcast of a virtual tour of the Rabin Center, a museum and research center in Tel Aviv. I sent the link and we said goodbye.

A student named Yevgeny (pseudonym) stayed after some others had already left the Zoom room and said he was not intending to convene. I asked why. "Because I'm not interested in Rabin." Having known this student for a couple of years, I assumed that this was not a political-ideological statement concerning the Israel-Palestine Oslo Accords or the Peace Treaty with Jordan, and yet I said, "But do you understand, Yevgeny, that this murder is an event that has had an enormous impact on Israeli society to this day, and if we do not want it to happen again, we should understand and know and learn about it?"

"OK, Etai," he said, "but I just don't care." This was one of those very many moments as an educator, in which I felt such dissonance. I had an urge to assertively say: "Just click the link and stop being rude!" and at the same time I thought: "What is on your mind, you complex and wondrous human?" Fortunately, the sentence that came out of my mouth was more similar to the latter. I am happy that I could stick to the values that we hope to see as an essential part of our school culture, and let the student speak his mind.

"Are you part of Israeli society?" I asked. "I'm Israeli because I live here. But I do not care," Yevgeny said. "Yes, Etai, I don't care either," Ilya suddenly joined in. I thought he just kept Zoom on and left, as he often did, not noticing that the class was over. Ilya continued: "Etai, I'm not Israeli. I'm Ukrainian. All my friends are Russian or Ukrainian. I'm in Israel, but I'm in Ukraine. Everyone feels that way, ask Dima too." It may be worth noting that they were both 17-year-olds who were born in Israel. I felt as if I was inside an article of an introductory course to Educational Sociology. I always thought that the quotes from the articles of those classes were not credible, but here they were, erupting from my computer's speakers.

I did everything within my power to just listen. Not to collide. Not to confront. We went into a long conversation about what the State of Israel has given and is giving them or is not giving them (“...it gave me nothing”). I told them what the State of Israel had given me. We talked about the possibility of not choosing between different ethnic and national identities (“...it does not have to be either-or”) and about our ability to integrate them into a more hybrid identity (“...you can be both!”). They brought up the issue of serving in the Israeli Defense Forces (“...I’m not interested in defending the country”), and also testified quite directly that this is the message from their parents (“...my father says that too”). I thought about this conversation for a long time. Yevgeny and Ilya had brought up so much that I found it difficult to identify the underlying “problems,” although I strongly felt that there were some big ones.

My school, ORT Ramat Yosef High School, was built at the beginning of the 1980s. It is located in Bat-Yam, the second poorest city in the Tel Aviv District, in which around a third of the population is composed of post-Soviet immigrants, most of them immigrated to Israel in the 1990s, and most of the others are descendants of Jews who immigrated to Israel from Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa during the 1950s. Most of our students come from working and low classes. We have approximately 360 students in our high school (tenth-twelfth grade) and around 60 teachers.

A democratic school, I believe, is one that prepares students to live in a democracy—a community of equal citizens who have rights and an impact on the public sphere. I see the conversation I presented as one that demonstrates the challenges that impede our efforts to fulfill this goal—lack of motivation to learn or eagerness to know; alienation from society and segregation between communities; and the absence of a sense of ownership and responsibility over the country.

MOTIVATION

Expectancy-value theory has been one of the most important views on the nature of achievement motivation. According to this theory, individuals’ expectancies for success and the value they have for succeeding are important determinants of their motivation to perform different achievement tasks (Wigfield, 1994). It can be useful to examine Yevgeny’s lack of motivation to participate in the activity through the lens of the expectancy-value theory. Based on my experience with Yevgeny, I could tell that low

levels of both elements—expectancy *and* value—influence his unwillingness to engage. “Expectancy” can be measured by the level of confidence that Yevgeny had in his ability to succeed in the task, or in this case, be engaged and understand the virtual tour. “Value” can be measured by how important, useful, or enjoyable he perceives this task. Yevgeny did not expect to understand the virtual tour, nor did he find it important to engage with its content. We could not expect him to attribute a higher value to an activity that does not meet any of his urgent everyday needs or suggest any solution to his problems, chief among which is the terrible financial situation of his family.

As of 2022, Israel is one of the most unequal high-income countries. The top 10% of the population earn 19 times more than the bottom 50% earn on average, which means that inequality levels are similar to those in the US (Chancel et al., 2021). For budgeting purposes, the Israeli Ministry of Education rates schools according to the socio-economic status of their families. In the context of extreme economic inequality, our school is rated 8 on a scale of 1–10, where 1 is the most affluent. Therefore, understandably, many of our families and students value activities based on their immediate economic potential.

Many of our students experience a helpless situation, in which on the one hand, they are obligated by law to attend school, and on the other hand, this institution prevents them from working and helping their families. This situation fosters passivity and lack of agency when many students feel that they come to school because they are forced to, and not because they choose to.

This mindset of many of our students can be compared to what Almond and Verba (2015) defined as a “subject political culture” in the national political context. In this type of political culture, citizens’ orientation toward the political system is relatively detached and passive, although they acknowledge its influence on their lives. For the subject, “the law is something he obeys, not something he helps shape” (Almond & Verba, 2015). Subject cultures are compatible with centralized, authoritarian political structures, and unfortunately, this is the kind of mindset that many of our students adopt in school.

If we want students to develop a sense of agency and a more participatory approach toward school as a model for their future relationship with the democratic political system, they must attribute a higher value to engagement in school life and academic tasks. In order for them to do it, I believe that we need to do two main things: First, we need to be more

effective at explaining school's relevance to *future* earnings, and second, we must find ways to make school more relevant to their *current* economic needs. While in recent years we made some progress in the first task, the second is far from being achieved. It is much easier for us to justify the existing system. We can easily explain how good grades can get you into college, and how college degrees can get you greater income. We encourage our students to dream of higher education by visiting colleges and by exploring different admission requirements, but we consistently ask them to overlook the present.

SEGREGATION

In an address in 2015, former Israeli President Reuven Rivlin delivered what has become known as the “four tribes speech.” He maintained that “secular” (non-observant) Jewish-Israelis, once a clear majority in the country, would soon become of similar size as the other three “tribes”: Ultra-Orthodox (“Haredi”) Jews, Modern-Orthodox Jews (“national-religious”), and the Arab citizens of Israel. The country is rapidly becoming a society comprised of four groups, equal in size (Sachs & Reeves, 2017).

These categories were chosen not for sociological accuracy but because they correspond to the four official educational “streams,” or separate school systems, in Israel. Although parents can choose the stream in which their kids study, very few don't follow their communal affiliations. The students in these four streams not only differ in the curricula they study or even the language they speak, but they may also, in fact, never meet each other during their education, and most likely not even later in life. By law, Arab and Haredi high-school graduates are not obliged to serve in the army. Therefore, the majority of Arab and Haredi students do not serve, and hence they are less likely to meet secular and national-religious Jews. In addition, only few Haredi students enter universities, so another potential space for integration is neglected (Ibid.).

Yevgeny's alienation from Israeli society can be explained by the segregation he experiences from other groups, as most students in the Israeli education system. Within walking distance from our school in Bat-Yam, there are Arabic public schools, national-religious public schools, and Ultra-Orthodox schools, but most of our students don't know anyone who studies there. Even within this already factious system, our secular community is further split, mainly into Russian-speaking students and

students of Jewish-Middle Eastern backgrounds. Students' friendships are often created within the borders of these two groups.

May 2021 was a devastating illustration of the harmful consequences of the mutual ignoring—and ignorance—of others in our democracy. A major outbreak of violence started with protests in Jerusalem and ended with Hamas launching rockets from the Gaza Strip into Israeli towns and the Israeli Air Force launching airstrikes in Gaza. In a chaotic couple of days, unprecedented widespread violent protests and riots intensified across Israel, particularly in cities with mixed Jewish and Arab populations. In Jaffa, a suburb of Tel Aviv with a significant Arab population, Arab protesters attacked police officers and journalists, just a couple of miles from our school. The flame of violence rapidly spread into Bat-Yam, where Jewish extremists attacked Arab-owned stores. An Arab motorist was pulled from his car and severely beaten on one of the main streets of the city. Some of our students were there, among the inflamed rabble.

In a moment of anger and deep frustration, using very unapologetic—some would say “callous”—language, I sent messages to my students through our WhatsApp groups. I urged them to move away from these groups of violent extremist Jews on the streets of Bat-Yam and stay at home. One student's mother then sent me a couple of paragraphs with as many synonyms as she could find for a “traitor,” embellished with most other curse words the Hebrew language could offer.

Two of the main characteristics of liberal democracies are tolerance and pluralism, and therefore, they both should be reflected in school life. I believe that these two values could not be fostered unless we encourage our students to meet and get to know each other, despite a general atmosphere of mutual suspicion. Remote learning made it easier than ever for us to create opportunities for students to meet individuals from other “tribes.” Thanks to Zoom, my students met a Haredi man from the other side of the country, and a Palestinian activist from Nablus, with whom an in-person meeting is nearly impossible, since they can't go to Nablus, and she can't come to Bat-Yam, without special permissions.

The memories from May 2021 push us to explore new ways of connecting to our nearby communities. Last year, we started a new in-person program of intergroup meetings with students from a nearby Arab school. Today, the importance of these initiatives becomes bigger, and their implementation becomes much harder, in light of the aggravating polarization in Israeli society. The efforts of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his ultra-Orthodox and ultranationalist allies to advance a divisive package

of legislation for a far-reaching overhaul of the judicial system resulted in a battle over the future of Israel's democracy (Kershner, 2023). Nine months of unprecedented large-scale protests against the government and counter protests by its supporters had almost pushed Jewish Israeli communities into a civil war. Then came 7 October 2023 and marked the start of the heaviest escalation in the region since the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Pain, grief and a scary wave of fury have spread across Israel and among our students since Hamas militants killed an estimated 1,200 Israelis and kidnapped 240. Current levels of mistrust and insecurity, intensified by gruesome videos on social media, make any attempt to create connections between our students and their Arab neighbors seem more impossible than ever. However, our mission as educators who wish to build a more humanistic and democratic future is to work with our students to expand the boundaries of their empathy. We cannot let the values that we try to foster stop at the border. Our future depends on our students' ability to see the people in the other side of the border as fellow humans, to acknowledge their narrative, and to grieve their loss too.

RESPONSIBILITY

I was beginning my last year of high school when my father and I entered a crowded hall and saw an illuminating slide on the screen: "Welcome to Intelligence Unit 8200." We knew much less about the unit than we did about some of the parents around us. A Member of the Israeli parliament, a famous poet, the General Commissioner of the Police and the CEO of Israel's largest media corporation—were only a few of the familiar faces in the hall. My father, a metal worker, whispered in my ear, "I think it is a good program, son. You are lucky." I realized that I had come from a different background than many of the other kids, and were it not for the army, I most probably wouldn't have found myself in the same place or status as them. It was the beginning of an experience that changed my life. In our context, the army serves as a social mobility accelerator that can determine one's career path, social networks, and future income. It would not be baseless to maintain that by redefining my peer-group and reshaping my self-image, the army is what ultimately brought me into Harvard.

Any attempt to create a democratic learning environment in Israeli high schools faces tension between two educational ideals. We wish to build our graduates' capacity to participate fully in the civil sphere as equal members of society, and at the same time, we want to develop an unyielding

commitment to human rights and nonviolence. Mandatory military service brings about a contradiction between these two goals. We want our students to fulfill their obligations as citizens, and we want them to do it to the best of their ability. But encouraging and preparing them for joining an organization whose declared purpose incorporates the use of violence apparently belie the very democratic values which we aim to foster.

Yevgeny's unapologetic declaration that he does not want to serve in the army is not a common scene in a secular Jewish high school in Israel. The ethos of protecting the only state of the Jewish people is one of foundational significance. I personally volunteered to serve in the army for five years, longer than the three-year mandatory period, as a result of a very strong sense of responsibility over the future of the State of Israel and the fate of the Jewish people, which I absorbed through my mainstream secular Israeli upbringing. I maintain that the same sense of responsibility and ownership that made me feel obliged to serve my country also developed a strong commitment to protect and advance its democratic character. I, like many other Israelis, was raised to believe that the country is "*mine*," and therefore if something is broken, I am the one to fix it.

In our unique context, our students' readiness to serve in the army is, therefore, a good litmus test of their responsibility and commitment to society. Military service is the immediate stage after graduation from high school in Israel, and therefore the focus on preparation efforts is parallel to college preparation in American high schools: schools want their students to realize their potential by getting the best grades in the army's exams and being accepted to the best units. However, the educational dilemma that arises from dealing with military service at school is another major challenge that we have to face when we envision our desired democratic society. On the one hand, military service is mandatory for our students, and we better prepare them for this psychological, social, and physical challenge. On the other hand, our role as educators is to mitigate militaristic tendencies, all the more so in a society that is often inclined to view security considerations as predominant and superior to democratic ones.

In addition to this complexity, the army effectively trains soldiers to serve in advanced tech roles, and hence it is a powerful mechanism for socio-economic mobility and social integration, both of which are crucial for the future success of our students. Some units in the Israeli Defense Forces have turned out thousands of tech entrepreneurs who went on to found tech companies or occupy leading positions in established ones.

These units are credited with playing a key role in developing Israel's tech industry, and their positive impact on the careers of the individuals who serve there is obvious (Valach, 2020). The army is also an effective integrator, providing a "meeting point" for Israelis of very different ethnic, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds. And as if these considerations were not complicated enough, some studies suggest that discharged soldiers tend to be more tolerant than high-school students about other cultures and ethnic origins (Itsik, 2020).

Our students do poorly on the army exams and are therefore less likely to serve in elite units, acquire professional skills that would advance their social mobility potential, and integrate themselves into higher echelons of Israeli society. While we must make sure that our underserved students start the next phase of their lives from a fair starting point, we need to find ways to balance our preparation efforts with adequate discourse about the moral challenges and prices of serving in an army and mind the risk of turning our school into a pre-military preparatory program.

The effort to find this sneaky balance is inherent in our everyday educational decisions. On the one hand, the army is a "regular guest" in our school. We have a senior teacher whose additional role is called "IDF preparation coordinator." She leads all sorts of programs and events, with two soldiers who visit our school a couple of times a week. One of the climaxes of the preparation efforts is a one-week basic military training program in an army base. This program, most commonly focused on 11th graders, is called *Gadna* (גדר"ע) and is popular in many of the secular and Modern-Orthodox Jewish schools in Israel. On the other hand, we try to promote critical thinking about the army and its role in the complex geopolitical situation. For example, one of the questions in a recent 12th-grade civics exam asked students to analyze a newspaper article about a soldier who had hit a left-wing activist in Hebron, and an earlier exam used an article about psychological damages caused to Palestinian kids by military night invasions. Students were asked to explain these cases using the vocabulary they acquired about human rights. These attempts are much less explicit than the military preparation programs, mainly because of the right-wing political atmosphere in our school's community, and our fear of experiencing a strong pushback from parents.

Counterintuitively, if we want a more pluralistic, equitable, and tolerant society, we must find a way to help our students do better as soldiers. This case highlights the challenge of educating about democratic ideals in a non-ideal democratic environment. Despite the unique context, I believe

that other educators from around the world can take it as one example of trade-offs and compromises of democratic ideals which are necessary steps in our way in building more democratic societies.

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Starting with Self, Sharing Academic Success, Co-creating the World

Manami Okuda

Education in Japan is at a crossroads, caught in the transformation from living by traditional values to democratic values in a fast-changing, global society. Japan is a rapidly aging country, with the entire population shrinking by roughly 640,000 people per year, and the percentage of the young generation under fifteen composing around twelve percent of the population, the lowest ratio since the national statistics began (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan, 2021). The low percentage of children in the population makes it difficult for young voices to be heard and represented, but there are other challenges in realizing a democratic school environment where children can thrive as their true selves. Drawing on my professional experiences with schools in Japan and visits and interviews with schools in the US, I will focus on three barriers that are most prevalent in Japan and present three visions of a democratic school that support children acquire necessary mindsets and skills for the world today.

The first barrier is the high-context culture which runs not by explicit rules and decision-making bodies but by implicit norms based on shame

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(恥: haji) within the community. Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede (2001) labels Japan a “collectivist” country and explains that “shaming, invoking the group’s honor, is an effective way of correcting offenders” (p. 235). When students are expected to “read the atmosphere” (空気を読む: kuki-wo-yomu) in schools and cannot express their identity and needs, severe consequences surface in two ways. Firstly, bullying is common in schools in Japan with 615,351 incidents reported in 2021, as the culture promotes students to police over each other for those who do not “fit in” to the implicit norms. The number of suicides from elementary to high schools is also rising, the number being highest with 415 incidents in 2020. Secondly, the number of students who refuse to attend elementary and middle school is the highest with 244,940 students in 2021 which has risen to 2.6 percent of the whole population of enrolled students (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, Japan, 2022). These numbers clearly show not the number of students not fitting into the school, but the number of cases where the school fails to provide a safe, loving space for the students.

The second barrier is the Confucian tradition of respecting elders. Historically, Japan has incorporated historical values from Confucianism such as “respect toward parents” (孝: ko) and “respect toward masters” (忠: chu) to strengthen the authority of the family and the broader community. Although these values are not prominently taught as part of the curriculum or textbooks, they remain powerful in the everyday norms of the education system. In their relationship with parents, a student’s choice of a career path is influenced deeply by what their parents believe is “stable” or “promising”, as they are the ones who will be supporting the students emotionally as well as financially. Within the school space, students are still mandated to bow toward their teachers at the beginning and the end of their one-sided lectures. Many out-of-date school rules remain in the control of adults with an absence of a review process or incorporation of students’ voices. Even in extracurricular activities, it is extremely common for junior students to prioritize and use honorific language toward senior students and coaches. When a person’s voice is valued more than the other because of age, it is institutionally difficult for younger generations to discuss on an equal footing with their elders.

The third barrier is the overemphasis on measuring individual academic mastery using numerical indicators. Currently, the Ministry of Education specifies the goals and scopes of learning in the Government Curriculum Guidelines (学習指導要領: gakushu-shido-yoryo) and designates schools

to submit public records on student grades in the Cumulative Guidance Report (指導要録: shido-yoroku), but sets transcripts as optional and encourages diverse forms of evaluations. However, it is common for schools to follow the tradition of administering written tests and distributing numerical grades to families which put academic pressure on students. In addition, educational institutions from middle school to university are often ranked by a deviation score, which is the main indicator by which parents, teachers, and companies use to identify students' capabilities. Other important competencies such as self-agency, critical thinking, or contribution to the community are often not taken into account in school classes or university entrance examinations.

The reason I have come to observe high-context culture, the Confucian value of respecting elders, and the overemphasis on measuring academic mastery in Japanese education as barriers to realizing democratic education derives from my experience learning at an American school in The Netherlands when I was eight to thirteen years old. My friends and I still recall memories of this school as a fun learning experience close to twenty years later: when we learned about medieval Europe by enacting as a peasant in a wax museum, when we learned about the digestive, respiratory, and circular systems by writing a fiction story traveling inside our bodies, or when we would give speeches to convince the whole elementary school about an issue that concerned each student the most.

When I returned to Japan, I was shocked to discover that most classes were one-sided lectures by teachers, and learning was not regarded as something fun or thought-provoking but as a tool for competition to enter the best universities for a stable future job. As a high school student, I faced rote learning for more than twelve hours every day, but now that I have graduated from university and experienced being on the job market, I fail to see how this learning serves us to live as our whole selves and helps create a democratic society. Because of the high-context culture, we never learn to voice and share our life aspirations with others, causing us to lack motivation or even have mental issues at work. Because of the Confucian tradition of respecting elders, young people are being too compliant with the elder population in both spheres of business and politics and not learning to exercise agency in how we would like to envision our society. Because of the overemphasis on measuring numerical mastery, we have less chance to develop other competencies necessary for transitioning from school to career, such as communicating effectively, thinking critically, learning how to learn, and working collaboratively. If this tendency

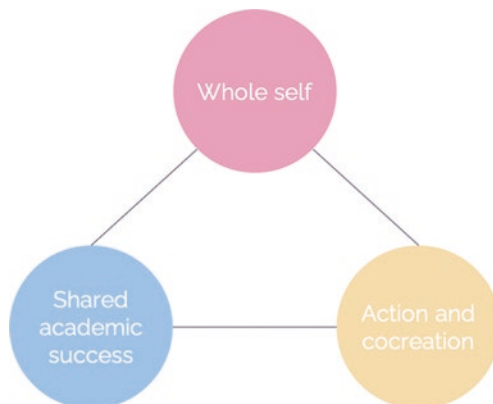
continues in education, Japan will be a society that is aging not just in population but also in the vibrancy of its people where new innovations no longer emerge in a democratic way.

In an attempt to break this loop, I teamed up with a group of university students to run “Exploring University Studies Workshops” in collaboration with private middle and high schools in the Greater Tokyo Area. The goal of these workshops is for middle and high school students to experience authentic learning by creating or solving problems that university students confront in their major and potential future careers. Middle and high school students can choose to attend the topic of their interest during their long holidays, as several university students prepare the workshop with their specific topic. The workshop generally runs for about two hours and the schedule includes check-ins, pair work or project work, presentation, and reflections on real-life problems they are likely to experience in their major. For example, a student studying medicine will include a mock medical examination and a student studying psychology will introduce a variety of theories psychiatrists use toward their patients. Besides the host university student, additional university students are supporting the group work; a ratio of one university student to five to six middle and high school students. At the end of the workshop, middle and high school students reflect on what they have learned in group shares and individual survey responses.

This workshop is the first model for realizing my vision of democratic schools in Japan. The vision includes these three pillars (Image 11.1):

1. Students, parents, and educators accept each other as whole-self human beings and start by understanding each other’s personal narratives, curiosity, and needs.
2. Students, parents, and educators are committed to everybody’s shared academic success through interdisciplinary, everyday challenges.
3. Students, parents, and educators take action to co-create the values and culture of the school, local community, and global society, by being mindful of the social impact of each action or inaction.

Image 11.1 Three pillars for the vision of a democratic school in Japan. (Designed by the author)



Students, parents, and educators accept each other as whole-self human beings and start by understanding each other's personal narratives, curiosity, and needs.

Democratic societies are composed of individuals, and many phenomena occur in reaction to the emotions and needs of individuals. Connecting learning and action can only be achieved if students, parents, and educators feel accepted to bring personal experiences and thoughts into education. To make self-expression a practice in everyday life, all activities will always include check-ins to get in touch with everybody's conditions and individual or group reflections to take time to connect the learning activity to a personal experience. School design will also play an essential role in realizing these values, such as having multiple seating options that enable students to discuss in circles or displaying student work and other symbols that represent the diversity of students. Students can express their authentic, vulnerable selves only when parents and educators also stand in the space as whole-self beings, supported by quality communication and reflection. Beginning with the school leader realizing their dominant characteristics and being emotionally present in meetings with teachers and students, the whole organization will learn to listen actively and be curious about each other as individuals. Parents and educators must also have room to grow. Coaching will be provided to help them understand their visions and shadows so that they can respect and support children's unconventional way of thinking and acting. When these mentalities are in place, schools will also be able to enact bigger systemic changes such as multi-age classrooms and continuous relationships with the community to make the learning space more diverse.

The “Exploring University Studies Workshops” were carefully designed to enable students to be their authentic, whole selves as much as possible within their usual setting of school classrooms. Many students are in fear of voicing their opinions and ideas because they worry about what their classmates, with whom their relationships are fixed for three to six years, will think of them. Therefore, the small groups are intentionally pre-arranged to have a mix of grades, so that students can experience working with other people who are not their ordinary classmates. To assure psychological safety, the university student mentor leads the introduction and check-in time, making sure that all members of the small group have the opportunity to participate. There are ground rules preset to the group work, such as “respect ideas first and then give feedback” or “take care so that all members in the team have the opportunity to speak about the same number of times”. At the end of the workshop, reflection time is secured so that each member can provide feedback to others on how they contributed to the group. This workshop is a great opportunity to reflect upon the students’ identities not just for middle and high school students, but for university students as well. By putting together a workshop on what they have learned in university, the university students also build mindsets and skills on how to make use of their expertise outside of the university.

Students, parents, and educators are committed to everybody’s shared academic success through interdisciplinary, everyday challenges.

“We are interdisciplinary but we believe in disciplines”. The words of Joshua Abrams, a former high-school math teacher and currently the school head of Meridian Academy, an independent school in Massachusetts, describe best how academic mastery should be incorporated in democratic schools (J. Abrams, personal communication, November 18, 2022). Focusing on shared academic success can be compatible with students gaining individual mastery. If the school is a place not for preparing students for life but is life itself, learning needs to be connected to solving everyday challenges. The main three pillars of learning that connect to everyday life would be growing life (science, math, health), creating a product (math, science, art), and communicating with people from diverse backgrounds (language, social studies). In everyday life, these skills take the form of not paper tests but growing or creating something by building relationships with other people. Therefore, instead of using individual test scores and report cards to measure learning, students can celebrate their work by having the opportunity to showcase their masterpieces to parents,

THREE PILLARS OF INTERDISCIPLINARY LEARNING

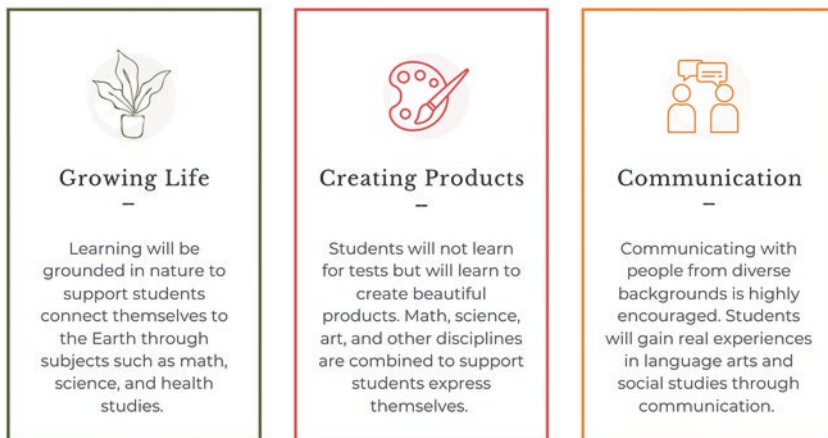


Image 11.2 Three pillars of interdisciplinary learning. (Designed by the author)

educators, and other people such as professionals or users related to their work (Image 11.2).

In the “Exploring University Studies Workshops”, students are never given grades but are mandated to work on a final product that can only be achieved in collaboration with others. The final product will be presented to everybody attending the workshop, which is a motivation for students to work in their multi-age groups and with their university student mentors. For example, with the topic of architecture, middle and high school students will measure their classroom and create a model of an inclusive learning space. With the topic of agriculture, middle and high school students decide on a crop, create a presentation about how to advertise that crop to a specific target audience, and collaborate with the vendor at the school to sell their product. When working on final products, students learn when each school subject is necessary for real life, such as language arts and design for creating advertisements or mathematics and physics for measuring their school buildings.

Students, parents, and educators take action to co-create the values and culture of the school, local community, and global society, by being mindful of the social impact of each action or inaction.

A common fear in Japanese society is putting one's ideas into action. Even when people have amazing thoughts, as the saying goes, "the stake that sticks out gets hammered down" (出る杭は打たれる: *deru-kui-wa-utareru*). With the respect toward individuals' whole selves and shared academic success, a democratic school can be a hopeful place where students, educators, and parents practice action and experience that their co-creation matters to others. Firstly, through the main three pillars of learning, students can contribute to the design of the school space with their products. As educator Ron Berger writes in his book, displaying beautiful student work "showcases more than anything a school ethic and culture that compels students to achieve more than they think possible" (Berger, 2003). Secondly, students and educators should discuss and review school norms periodically. By gathering together and casting one vote per person for each discussion topic, students learn how democratic societies work and how they can experience how they can make a difference. Lastly, students will learn to problem-solve in more authentic ways by working on the community's problems. When students come in contact with the community, this is the phase where students and adults outside of school must take on the challenge together to infiltrate democratic values on an equal footing.

All "Exploring University Studies Workshops" are aimed at working on a real-life problem university students face in their majors, connecting school subjects, the university major, and real-life situations. During the final presentation, middle and high school students explain their thought processes and their group action. Furthermore, students will also write down their takeaways and future challenges in the individual reflection. By recording and sharing future actions, middle and high school students will be able to understand interests and support each other in achieving them when they return to their ordinary school life.

"Exploring University Studies Workshops" embodies all three pillars of democratic education necessary in Japan, but this is only the first step. The visions can be strengthened further in different ways. For the whole self, the workshop can take place outside of the classroom settings to decrease peer tension, for example, in an environment filled with nature. For shared academic success, the ultimate outcome would attain greater authenticity

through continuous integration of learning across the semester, employing multiple review stages. For action and co-creation, the workshop's design can foster increased collaboration among students, educators, parents, and local community members, allowing everyone to collectively celebrate the journey of learning together. When the cycle of accepting whole selves, sharing academic success, and taking action for co-creation runs in the school, students will flourish with self-agency as naturally curious and creative beings.

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Nurturing Lifelong Learning Through Creative Projects

Mo Kwok

The popular saying among parents 「贏在起跑線上」 (which directly translates to “winning at the starting line”) sums up the competitive nature of education in Hong Kong. As education attainment positively correlates with lifetime earnings, many in this pro-prosperity society measure their own parenting success by their child’s scholastic achievements, focusing on rankings and results rather than process, experiences and skills. The cultural landscape of education in Hong Kong could be characterized as paternalistic, neoliberal, competitive and dated with a hint of colonial remnant. With the lack of personalization and project-based learning, many top-tier public schools have not updated their curriculum in the last two decades; even the “best” schools fail to prepare students for an unpredictable future. The status quo remains partially because major stakeholders, such as the Education Bureau and parents, are blinded by international studies that position Hong Kong’s education system as top in the world, right behind South Korea and Finland, with its secondary students’ overall performance in mathematics, science and reading coming

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fourth in the world (Avvisat et al., 2018). These rankings fail to measure multiple intelligence including but not limited to interpersonal skills, critical thinking and creative problem solving, skills with growing demand according to the Future of Jobs report (Saadia et al., 2020). Within a strict system that allows for very few winners, Hong Kong students face immense academic pressures resulting in seven students ending their lives in May 2022, a record high in three years (Suicide Rates by Age Group in Hong Kong, 2011–2021). Student suicide, clinical depression and anxiety are common among students in secondary school and university. The unsustainable nature of this education system is mirrored by the city's pursuit of endless economic growth. The over-emphasis on academic performance in literacy, math and science and the lack of student-centered, project-based and experiential learning are reasons Lifelong Labs was established (see Image 12.1).

In 2018, Lifelong Labs was founded with the vision of democratizing quality creative education by making it accessible and affordable to students of all ages. We do this by accepting students ages two or above, with the only criterion that they have a project they are passionate about, and



Image 12.1 A picture of Lifelong Labs, in Hong Kong

offer courses at different times, duration and price points to accommodate students from all backgrounds. Our youngest student is two and a half and our oldest student is eighty-six. Regardless of age, students are expected to be committed to their own idea from start to finish, pushing through both the exciting and “boring” parts of completing a project. Located in Central, the heart of the city, Lifelong Labs is an educational maker space offering after-school programs and holiday camps to students and 1-on-1 sessions on digital literacy for lifelong learners. Equipped with a kitchen, 3D printer, camcorders, MIDI keyboards, synthesizers, miter saws and other tools, students at Lifelong Labs brainstorm, prototype, iterate and bring their ideas to life, often on an industry-standard level. There are no tests or grades, but each student has their own personalized style filled with photographs, writings and videos of process and progress. At the end of each project or camp, parents and siblings are invited to attend in-person exhibitions, concerts, film screenings and fashion shows where students give themselves and receive feedback, similar to a friendly version of the art school critique. In December 2022, students were able to showcase and sell their products at the first Lifelong Labs Christmas market. The five young entrepreneurs ended up raising over US1000 for the local Refugee Union to combat rising food prices.

During the school year, we run our signature course *The Dreammaker Studio* where students are invited to write down ten ideas and those ideas however wild form the basis of the curriculum, working on one project at a time. For younger students, at the end of a larger project, parents are invited for a feedback session and celebrate the work either through a film premier, exhibition, concert or show and tell. Typically, retiree or kindergarten students attend class in the morning while K-12 students attend class in the afternoon to the evening. Examples of past projects include two-year-old Austin creating a life-size functional traffic light, 4-year-old Arjun and 6-year-old Mysha establishing a sticker shop that supports the homeless, 10-year-old Morgan building a cookie business where all proceeds go to the local dog rescue, 11-year-old Jayden is working on a rap album, 12-year-old Jamie and Nico creating an electric skateboard, 16-year-old Olivia starting a clothing line, Tracy who is in her 40s filming for her own cooking channel and blog, Bill who is in his 80s recording covers of old classics and performed at our open mic night.

Tracy has been coming to Lifelong Labs for four years now. She retired early from investment banking and has always had a passion for cooking. One of her first projects was to create a website and short videos that

document her 90-year-old grandmother's secret recipes, everything from snake soup (a local delicacy) to braised duck with sea cucumber. The idea was to bring restaurant-quality food to home cooking, and the goal was to make written and video recipes readily available online. Prior to this project, she never owned a personal laptop. Digital literacy, specifically editing on iMovie and building a website on Squarespace, was something that could open a world of possibilities for her. In these past few years, we have worked on everything from learning how to set up zoom meetings to creating excel spreadsheets that allow her to keep track of the elderly that she visits as a volunteer. Most recently, she took a year-long course to become a certified chef in French cuisine. As part of her graduation celebration, she was able to shoot photos and videos, airdrop them to iMovie, add a soundtrack and voice over to create a short clip; this is impressive progress, considering she had trouble learning how to drag when she first acquired a MacBook.

The other type of course that we have is our *Creative Genius* holiday camps, where students ages 6 and up get a taste of being an architect, fashion designer, filmmaker (see Image 12.2), photographer, industrial



Image 12.2 Students at Lifelong Labs

designer, and entrepreneurship YouTuber. Contrary to local culture, these course attempt to push back on the idea that geniuses belong to the realm of math and sciences, that if students are able to find their passion early on, they too can succeed in creative fields such as art, film, and fashion, which many parents deem as a death sentence in light of their retirement funds. These camps are six hours long over three days and resemble the actual day-to-day work in the field. The industry-informed and future-focused curriculum is usually coupled with a field trip; for photography, we go to a waterfall to take long exposures; for fashion, we go to a fabric market, etc. The field trip is not only the students' highlight but also an essential part of learning how to gather materials or scout for new locations to continue the project beyond the camp. For example, during one of our camps which focused on social entrepreneurship, three students collaborated and came up with the idea of hosting a ping pong tournament to fundraise for underprivileged students who could not afford after-school activities. Over the course of the three-day camp, they filmed a promotional video, designed an online invite and set up a website where people could purchase tickets, which were US\$50 each. On a Saturday afternoon, over 20 people participated in the tournament, families and friends of the students came to support the project and the cause, and they raised about US\$1000. A separate trip was arranged to pay a visit to the youth who live in cage homes and subdivided flats in Shum Shui Po, one of the poorest districts in Hong Kong. The three students then distributed the funds in the form of Lai See packets which is a customary red envelope containing a monetary gift (see Image 12.3). This year the students decided to continue the project outside of the studio and will be hosting a second edition of the tournament this fall.

At Lifelong Labs, there is a strong emphasis on creativity and problem solving. These skills cannot be replaced by algorithms and prepare students for an unpredictable future in a data-driven world. The highly personalized curriculum coupled with individual attention gives Lifelong Labs students structure and support to pursue ambitious projects that have the potential to impact a whole community. If democracy has to do with making the lives of ordinary people better, then ironically, this type of democratic learning environment, students as citizens (*demos*) with power (*kratos*), is not democratic at all, because only a select few have access.

Most, if not all, of the students mentioned above belong to the top one percent in Hong Kong, with a monthly household income of at least US\$15,000. Many of the students who attend *The Dreamaker Studio*



Image 12.3 Students distributing Lai See packets

come from “ultra-high net worth” families each with at least US\$30 million in assets. In short, the demographic of students who attend Lifelong Labs come from either rich or ultra-rich families, with 20 percent attending elite public schools and 80 percent attending private international schools which only accounts for 6 percent of all schools in Hong Kong (Student Enrolment Statistics, [2020/2021](#)). The sad reality is that Lifelong Labs have reinforced the widening achievement gap in Hong Kong, neglecting a large population of students who do not have access to project-based and experiential learning. The main reason Lifelong Labs has struggled to fulfill its vision of making quality creative education affordable is the lack of institutional support and economy of scale. Lifelong Labs is a stand-alone small business run by two full-time staff, without any institutional funding or backing. The educational model can be likened to a one-room schoolhouse (學堂) found in Qing Dynasty, where one teacher (師父) has only three to six pupils (學徒). The idea is that quality education lies in the trust and attention that enables a teacher

to curate a personal experience that matches the student's interest, skill and level of challenge. The student-teacher relationship is key to the learning experience at Lifelong Labs, and the relationship is not scalable. Despite the original intent, Lifelong Labs is only able to achieve financial sustainability by charging a premium on classes, which means, the majority of classes and courses still only cater to families with relatively large disposable incomes.

To address the issue of widening achievement gap, and the lack of student diversity, Lifelong Labs has partnered SoCo, Hong Kong's leading non-profit organization that advocates for the socially marginalized groups such as children and elderly living in poverty, teenage mothers, the homeless and ex-convicts and the mentally-ill. They do so by providing legal advice, regular visitations, transitional housing, food vouchers and other services. This partnership has enabled Lifelong Labs to provide free courses to middle school students, paid internships to recent high school graduates and a social entrepreneurship bootcamp that allows college graduates to start their business with start-up capital of US\$1500. This is made possible by collaborating with current students, their parents, interns and staff from SoCo. Students who are working on this project are usually from privilege and looking to apply for colleges and boarding schools abroad. They need a substantive project to write about in their personal statement and stand out from other applicants. Some of these students' parents are passionate about youth empowerment through education and hold positions in power within the public, private and non-profit sector. They have influence over decisions in grantmaking. By leveraging funds and resources within the Lifelong Labs community, students and parents are able to make a positive impact in Hong Kong.

Lifelong Labs hires youth who live in cage homes and subdivided flats for paid internships in an attempt to democratize the hiring process and who get access to early work experiences and references (recommendation letters). Joe and Ding Ding are some of the interns who have shaped the programs for middle schoolers, by identifying that swimming is a skill that many of their peers lack. As a result a summer program was created, where middle school students learn how to swim, among other fun activities such as identifying species through wilderness photography, songwriting by the sea, nutrition and outdoor cooking. Moving forward, Lifelong Labs hopes to shift its focus from project-based to experiential learning, moving the emphasis from materials to skill sets, where students are able to recreate and design their own creative learning adventure outside of Lifelong Labs.

In the context of Hong Kong, a democratic learning environment would look as follows. Parents take a step back and allow students to be drivers of their own learning, exploring interests and pursuing subjects that they are interested in. Schools would free teachers from standardized testing and instead, curate a series of challenges for students that are personal, relevant and creative, teaching students how to learn instead of what to learn. Schools ought to be centers of redistribution, equitably allocating resources and attention, creating equal opportunity to become geniuses and setting *all* students up for success, where students can discover, master and showcase their knowledge and skill in one domain. This will entail destabilizing the current system and “facade” of meritocracy, requiring drastic but effective changes such as allowing students to select their own subjects in high school based on their passion, separating the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Exam (HKDSE) into an exit exam for high school and entrance exam for university and making the HKDSE optional for students who wish to pursue an alternative to tertiary education. Students should be able to enjoy a learning environment that is supportive and non-judgmental in which parents and teachers listen to each student’s dream, encourage experimentation and normalize failure. Strategic partnerships should also be formed between the public and private sector whereby education is once again a vehicle for social mobility; kindergartens, schools and universities are a place that corrects inequality instead of reinforcing the achievement gap through scholarship programs; Chinese language programs for minorities; childcare and kindergarten for low-income single and subsidies; and extracurriculars for gifted athletes and creatives. The Education Bureau is responsible for ensuring the curriculum is up to date with reference to the future of work and preparing students for real-life situations such that students need to rely on nepotism to succeed. Subjects such as economics, law and medicine should be integrated into math, language, and science, to give students a taste of what it is like to get into those industries. To conclude, learning must be decentralized, from parent and teacher-centric (paternalism) to student-centric, public and private sectors should join hands in correcting inequality in educational access and uneven distribution of resources, so that each and every student in Hong Kong are able to create, learn and experience with purpose, structure and support. With all changes at the pace of an evolution not a revolution, Lifelong Labs aims to fill that lacuna, where learning is personalized and experiential and prototype the future of education in Hong Kong, one project at a time.

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PART II

High Quality Equitable Education



Moving Beyond a Checklist: Community Schools for Democratic Education in California and Beyond

Abbie Cohen

On May 18, 2022, the California Department of Education announced in a press release the first round of grants for at least \$3 billion dedicated to the Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP). This unprecedented sum of money is the beginning of a seven-year investment into the establishment and support of community schools across the state. By late May, 268 school districts across California had been awarded hundreds and thousands of dollars in grants, including L.A. Unified School District which received \$44 million to support thirty-one already-established community schools and the creation of new schools (Newberry, 2022). This sum of public state money toward public education is historic, a dramatic increase from previous state budgets.

Linda Darling-Hammond, the State Board of Education President and a leading education scholar, described this monumental sum of public money as “exciting.” Darling-Hammond expressed what many longtime

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educational advocates know to be true, “schools in communities with high rates of poverty, homelessness, and food insecurity lack the funds to address student mental health issues, improve wellness, and support learning recovery” (California Department of Education, 2022). A 2021 report published by the Public Policy Institute of California described the persistent poverty levels that continue to impact families and young people across the state. They found that more than a third of Californians are living in or near poverty, about 6.3 million people lack basic resources, and poverty disproportionately impacts children, seniors, Latinx communities, and less-educated adults (Bohn et al., 2021). The CCSPP approach aims to address these longstanding inequities that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic by utilizing Community Schooling to support the whole child. This approach is supported by four empirically proven pillars that are “mediating factors through which schools achieve good outcomes for students” (Maier et al., 2018). The four pillars are:

1. Integrated student supports: Embedding social services into schools, including social-emotional learning, trauma-informed care, and restorative justice practices.
2. Expanded learning time and opportunities: Including afterschool, weekend, and summer programs for additional academic and enrichment activities.
3. Family and community engagement: Bringing parents and community stakeholders into the schools to support school-based decision-making and educational opportunities for adult learners.
4. Collaborative leadership and practice: Implementing a culture of lateral leadership and learning for school-based staff that democratizes power and decision-making, including a community-school coordinator who manages the work between schools and community partners.

These pillars of Community Schools represent the bedrock of a democratic approach to education and inject participatory voice, engagement, and power-sharing into American public schools that have traditionally limited and oppressed especially students from historically marginalized groups. The state of California is now in the national vanguard, reigniting the historical approach of Community Schools in twenty-first-century America.

California can tap into the existing Community School institutional memory and knowledge already established within the state. In 2017, the Los Angeles Unified Board of Education unanimously agreed to the Community Schools Initiative (CSI), after a coalition of parents, educators, and community members (known as ROSLA¹) demanded greater voice in public schooling (Saunders et al., 2021). This bold move promised to create schools as hubs for the community and meet young people and their families where they are in a culturally responsive, restorative, and holistic way.

As a doctoral candidate at UCLA, I had an opportunity to visit an established Community School in the fall of 2022 in Southern California. My fieldnotes and experiences there underscore the way the four pillars were enacted and implemented into the school's governance, culture, and relationships.

PILLAR I: INTEGRATED STUDENT SUPPORTS

Arriving on campus I am surrounded by art—welcome signs in English, Spanish, and Korean, mirroring the languages most students speak at home and in the broader community. A massive public art mural covering every inch of an entire 100 ft wall reads “I see you. I am you. We are one.” I imagine seeing that every day and what that reminder might mean for each student, staff, and community member, walking through these doors. Entering the front office, I met a secretary on the phone speaking in Spanish with a binder out in front of her that reads “Legal Services.” Across the hallway, a quick glance over my left shoulder, there’s an on-campus immigration legal clinic for families, the first in the country, to support students and their families with visas and asylum applications. There’s a big sign out front “Immigration Family Legal Clinic” reprinted in Spanish and Korean, too. The feeling is clear: all are welcome.

The law clinic supports the school community (students, teachers, parents) and also the broader community in which the school is situated, thereby fulfilling the first pillar of the Community School model. The clinic opened on the heels of Donald Trump's presidential election as a reaction to a call from the broader community, and since its inception it has provided hundreds of individuals with legal counseling and support.

¹The 2017 California-based community schools resolution was led by “Reclaim our Schools Los Angeles” (ROSLA), which empowered a network of stakeholders (parents, educators, students, and community members) to advance the community school model.

Additionally, the clinic has organized community education events on workers' rights, and the basics of U.S. immigration law. This school, while ultimately dedicated to student learning, understands that meeting the needs of young people is broader than just what occurs in a traditional classroom setting. It includes supporting students and their families' immigration status and providing legal assistance when necessary. The family law clinic is not only a physical manifestation of integrated student supports, but a call-and-response from the community's needs.

PILLAR 2: EXPANDED LEARNING TIME AND OPPORTUNITIES

Partnerships, partnerships, partnerships. I heard that word thrown around by every member of the school community from students to teachers to administrators. This school relies on its partnerships in order to provide additional learning and enrichment opportunities to students and families. The students who guided me on a tour around campus shared the numerous and varied activities that they had participated in since coming to this school.

I got to spend a weekend at UCLA, that was so great, to be at a real university for the weekend. Even though it's not far from here, it feels like another world, so it was great to spend time there.

The partnership between this school and university partners is unique to the Community School approach. It offers opportunities for students to engage on university campuses, and it provides university students like myself an avenue to engage at the school and support the work of teaching and learning. The reciprocal relationship offers tangible opportunities for all stakeholders to have enriching and engaging relationships. The school also provides additional college workshops both from school counselors and third-party intermediary non-profit organizations. As one school partnership staff member shared with me, "the more opportunities and partnerships the better, so we can meet as many students' needs as possible." When I asked her how she managed the many afterschool and extra-curricular opportunities, she smiled knowingly, "it depends on a strong communicative relationship." Other students shared with me how they attended college classes, played basketball, and accessed mental health therapy through the partnerships and opportunities at this

school—encapsulating and bridging the first two pillars together and reinforcing these pillars are not static, but dynamic and overlapping.

PILLAR 3: FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Ledy Garcia, the former UCLA Community School principal in Koreatown in Los Angeles, and the new Associate Director for Professional Learning for UCLA's Center for Community Schooling, has described how Community Schools work differently: “We’ve known some students since Kindergarten; we have a history with their family and siblings, when they hit a bump in the road, we respond differently” (Fensterwald, 2022). Family and community engagement is not just a filler sentence that Community Schools spout out for recruitment or advertising purposes. Rather, the school that I visited embodies it. Walking around the campus, I ran into parents of all different ethnic-racial and age backgrounds who volunteer or are paid for their work on campus whether it’s handing out additional food during lunch time or providing language translations. Parents are participating in their children’s school life in *real* and physically present-ways. As a staff member shared “if parents come in looking for help, they’ll get help.”

Located in the middle of the campus, there is a parent center, which supports parents in a wide range of activities and in their home languages (occasionally translated by other peer parents). The center meets with parents one-on-one, offers trainings and workshops throughout the year often developed and implemented by parent representatives, and the principal holds monthly parent gatherings to share a wide range of information with families often in multiple languages.

PILLAR 4: COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP AND PRACTICE

On the most structural level, the Community School I visited is guided by a decision-making council comprised of teachers, students, parents, academics, and community partners that centers the school’s vision, selects and annually evaluates leadership, and approves the yearly budget. However, the collaborative leadership and practice was even more visible in the moment-to-moment practices of the school. During my visit, all stakeholders were given an equal voice to describe the school. No one school representative held the mic or dominated the soapbox. The relationships and shared leadership across power differentials were evident.

A sophomore at the school told me, “I love the teachers at this school. They actually try hard to have relationships with us. They are funny, make jokes, and have fun with us.” A junior who had been attending this school since kindergarten shared, “I see my 1st grade teacher all the time. It’s fun, plus my cousin just had her in class, too. My English teacher I liked a lot because even though she didn’t have perfect Spanish, it didn’t matter because she tried. Plus, she always had visuals and PowerPoints in English and Spanish to help the students who are learning and lots of pretty designs. She was really good at relating the content in class to us.”

Students, teachers, staff, and administrators repeated that relationships were at the core of their work to help students succeed. All of the services and opportunities at the school were made possible by the many hats each school community member wore, and each was in service of students’ learning. As one support staff member shared, “community schools can be anything the community needs it to be, if you have people who want to be everything.” Her vision for Community Schools relies on investment from people who are supported financially to continue this hard but necessary work. The school visit represents the possibility of what the Community School public investment could mean for the future of California and democratically run schools.

Community Schools, as John Rogers, a professor of education at UCLA, argues, can be places where “schools can *unearth* and *build* the full capabilities of all young people so that they can collectively make their community better. It *links* young people and community organizations in a web of trust and solidarity. And it supports the *development of youth as empowered civic agents* able to use tools of inquiry, deliberation, and communication to address the consequential problems of our times” (Rogers, 2022). Importantly, Rogers also notes that Community Schools’ popularity ebbs and flows during times of social and political upheaval (Camera, 2021). In our current moment in the United States—defined by a seemingly never-ending pandemic, hyper political polarization, and a democracy quite literally under threat—Community Schools are desperately needed. They can bring people together, particularly young people and their communities, to transform society.

MOVING FORWARD

All eyes will be on California as CCSPP launches year one of this seven-year initiative. As the state noted in their press release, CCSPP is “the first statewide initiative to provide funding, support, and standardization of the program through common guiding pillars” (referencing the Community School pillars listed above).

Importantly, California’s language presents a cause for concern. The use of the term “standardization” seems oxymoronic given the guiding tenets of Community Schools. As the UCLA Center for Community Schooling 2021 teacher-authored report writes, Community Schools are “grounded in the belief that schools belong to students, families, teachers and school staff, Community Schools aims to elevate the voices of the community...” (ibid.). It’s hard to imagine the state successfully standardizing Community Schools’ approach when so much of their strength is rooted in the unique, complex, and dynamic neighborhoods in which they exist. Each school shapes—and is shaped by—its community. This push for standardization raises questions like: How does the push for standardization fit together with this new rejuvenated emphasis on democratic local control?

California’s investment in CCSPP may offer an opportunity to study this tension. At the start of the grant, 286 school districts, county offices of education, and charter schools will receive grants, and UCLA’s Center for Community Schooling, alongside the Alameda County of Education, Californians for Justice—an education non-profit; and the National Education Association—the teachers’ union, will collaborate as a “Lead Technical Assistance Center” to support the implementation of Community School approaches across the state. Technical assistance, as one of the leaders for this new hub told me anonymously, feels fraught. The center is faced with daunting tasks like budgets and timelines, while simultaneously needing to educate those unfamiliar with Community Schools. She shared, “it’s more about cultural change, political and economic change, and recognizing that the work needs to stay at the ground and school level, and that’s what we hope to help do.” Ultimately, while the pillars offer a guiding framework for Community Schools, they require high quality implementation. The pillars cannot just be a checklist for standardization efforts. Community Schools, as any teacher, administrator, student, or community member will tell you, requires centering deep relationships.

CCSPP has exciting potential and provides significant resources to foster collective agency through democratic approaches of Community Schools. Community Schools, by nature of their design, are meant to transform while simultaneously foregrounding students, schools, and communities' voices and needs. Importantly, transformation takes time. As teachers from Community Schools remind us: "the current focus on Community Schools presents an important opportunity to re-center attention on how Community Schools influence the core instructional practices and relationships within schools" (Saunders et al., 2021). This new investment in Community Schools represents a beacon of transformation that centers young people and their families, and positions schools as places of change, resistance, and hope.

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Calling the Shots: How Each Student Can Flourish with Freedom, Equity, and Community

Franco Mosso Cobián

When Maya Angelou tried to define what it means to live with a purpose, she said, “You can only become truly accomplished when you do something that you love.” What a beautiful, transcendental opportunity to discover the reasons why you exist on this earth.

Every year in Peru, the lion’s share of our eight million students across the coast, the Andes, and our jungle get *educated* away from their purposes and from a life of accomplishment. After many decades of personal and societal liberation, our students still struggle to learn in a classroom where they are not receiving orders or being told what to do. Still others who know where they want to go and who want to speak out about the status quo of their own education are struck with punishment by authority figures.

As in many countries that have a troublesome colonial history, the foundation of our educational system is a set of rules that was originally

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designed to preserve segregation and disempowerment (of women, of people of color, of people of certain ethnic descent, of people in rural areas). Peruvians still carry on their shoulders the weight of two hundred years of a culture where students were trained to lower their heads and to silence their voice, rather than to participate in the making of our future as a society. In a country where eight out of ten fourth graders in rural areas cannot understand a simple text, for some students that possibility is as distant as the stars.

Enseña Perú is a non-profit organization created almost fourteen years ago to contribute to providing a great education. Our mission is to build a social movement of leaders empowered to transform education; we do that by finding committed and diverse individuals throughout our nation, developing and connecting them through leadership programs and then organizing them to innovate and scale innovation that will empower young people everywhere in our country.

We believe this approach can transform education. Our work is fundamentally a response to the institutional fragility that we have had since we became a republic, 200 years ago. Although in the last fifty years, we have had sixty-two ministers of education, in the last fifteen months alone we have had eight ministers of education! A few years ago the leaders of the 220 districts were appointed purely by political affiliation, not by merit. In the last five years, we have had seven presidents. Almost all of our presidents in this century are either in jail, on trial, on the run, or dead. As I write this chapter, we are again flooded in social conflict, as the streets are filled with the sounds of bullets, teargas, rocks, chants, interviews, road-blocks, police, protesters, hope, fear, despair, anxiety, anger, fire, and blood,¹ after yet another president tried to close the congress and is now processed for treason against the country. Peru is now governed by a new president who is not recognized by half of our people. Every day there are demands that she should resign. We have lost more than sixty lives, including some lives of young people. For some people in my country, these struggles represent a fight for stability; for others, it is the fight for justice.

¹According to the office of “Defense of the people” there were 219 social conflicts in Peru, most of them because of the political turmoil our country is going through: <https://www.defensoria.gob.pe/defensoria-del-pueblo-registro-219-conflictos-sociales-y-mas-de-mil-acciones-colectivas-de-protesta-durante-el-mes-de-enero-2023/>

It is in this context that our hope on top authorities and politicians (the formal positions of power) began having an expiration date. We believe that the future of education, and of our society, will be shaped outside of the public sector. We believe change will occur through the richness of talent in communities, which always existed, but have often been overlooked. Today, as I look around, I see entire regions where innovation is possible by uncovering a critical mass of existing leadership. Our communities have no shortage of leadership. The national gap is between our current and future capacity to unlock that leadership.

Through *Enseña Perú*, we have tried to narrow that gap. In our first seven years, we had leadership programs for adults: teachers, principals, and professionals from various fields. Through these programs we were able to find leaders of all walks of life that want to innovate as part of a movement to change education. The leaders came from across the political, religious, and socioeconomic spectrum. For example, a school principal who alongside her students leads an incredible project of community service for the elderly or a group of teachers who organize the whole community to empower kids to adopt healthy eating habits or the professional who helps students co-produce original documentaries about the challenges in their community. These were all inspiring individuals and groups.

However, it dawned on us: are we going to be successful as a social movement if we haven't explicitly made room for student leaders? After all, these are the very individuals who are experiencing so many inequities. It occurred to me—and this is how I explain it today—that it would be similar to a women's rights movement led by men. It makes no sense, right? That is why our last and most promising leadership program is for students from fourteen to seventeen years old, who have fallen in love with the purpose of transforming education and are willing to raise their voice and their actions on behalf of their schoolmates. A group of hundreds of Peruvian Malalas—if you will—is what we dream of.

May 27, 2022.

I am pacing inside my apartment in Lima at 2 p.m., having a conversation through my cellphone, taking a turn every three steps. "I have based my character on my mother," says Mileydy, my seventeen-year-old student from Ayacucho—a region in the Peruvian Andes—"but now I can't move forward with writing the story because I'm afraid that I will write something that will betray her," she adds. "This is part of the process," I say while raising my shoulder and tilting my head. "Why don't we go back to your original purpose? You decided that your project would be to write

and publish five stories that would mobilize people to think differently about education, right?” I say walking toward my couch. “Yes. Maybe I could try to find my characters by drawing them?” she says not without a bit of hesitation. I stop pacing. “You know who did that as part of her writing process? Remember in February when we were learning about the skill of inspiring others through creative writing? Margaret Atwood sometimes hand-drew her characters in different situations, to get to know them. Remember, she said that writing is like going into the darkness, finding something, and bringing it into the light,” I say with enthusiasm. “Yeah, I can do that. That sounds good,” she says. “Awesome,” I say, still standing. “How about if we talk next Friday at the same time?” I say. “Good,” says Mileydy, “thank you, professor.”

I met Mileydy last year, thanks to the universe. She came to a seven-week virtual module where we brought together students between fourteen to seventeen years old to grow as change-makers for Peru. After finishing the module, all students received an invitation to apply to take the next step, which was to apply to a one-year student leadership program.

In December 2021, I received her application. “My family told me that there are some students that like education and some that don’t, but I know there is more than that,” she wrote. “I feel I am close enough to the classroom to see the many burdens that students carry. I had a friend who had to help at home, take care of his cattle, and also study. He was labeled as a bad student because he did not get good grades in math and literacy. There was a lot of criticism but little help, and he ultimately left school. I tried to help by giving speeches and stuff, but I don’t think I had enough strength to help people think differently and make changes. I haven’t given up.” Mileydy was accepted into our program.

The leadership program consists of two phases over the period of one year ranging from January to December. Phase one is called the Summer Residence (January and February), in which students plan powerful projects to change education in their communities while learning twenty-first-century skills that are valuable for them as change-makers. Phase two occurs throughout the rest of the year (March to December); during this time students get to challenge themselves to lead changes in education through their projects and learn from their own personal experience.

On January 14, 2022, Mileydy started the Summer Residence. During this six-week-long virtual space, she met hundreds of participants from all

of our leadership programs.² From March until December, approximately eight million Peruvian students were expected to go back to classrooms after a two-year school shutdown. The leaders in our programs intended to positively impact the lives of some of these young people.

The Summer Residence consists of two components for our student leaders. The first one is a curriculum of learning experiences, organized in four-session or two-session modules with a weekly group reflection of the cohort of student leaders. This residence is much more than a series of modules. In our experience, the opening residence is an act of empathy and love.

The strength of my purpose is like the strength of an oak tree. I am grateful to say that after fourteen years of work, there is nothing and no one that could suppress my purpose in life. I will keep working tirelessly for kids around the planet in my next thirty years of life. But my kids are still finding themselves, as change agents, and as teenagers. We are in different places of our citizen, personal and biological lives. And that requires careful attention and esteem. That is how we run our residence (and the whole year, for that matter).

Here is a progression of what they learned during the first five weeks, in an environment full of love, community, empathy, and autonomy:

- Week one:
 - Leading competency-based education
 - Understanding educational inequity
- Week two:
 - Inspiring others through creative writing
 - Creating safe learning spaces
- Week three:
 - Managing personal wellbeing
 - Genuine communication

²Enseña Perú, a non-profit founded in 2009, offers leadership programs for educational leaders of all ages, walks of life, and sectors. It has the mission of building a national movement of leadership that fights for a transcendent education.

- Curiosity and research
- Building the curriculum of our dreams
- Week four:
 - Ethical decision making
 - Facilitating the session of our dreams
- Week five:
 - Creating my own growth plans
 - Introduction to adaptive leadership
 - Educational innovation: design-driven methods

For every learning experience, each student leader created a small product of their own choice and inspiration to share with his or her peers. Students had the freedom to choose the format in which they shared. Some used text, some used the online design tool Canva, some used spoken word, and others used live materials, such as physical art drawings or objects they manufactured on their own. My students and I agreed on a couple of rules. The first one was “No grades, no rankings, just growth.” The second one was that positive feedback is called giving a star, while a comment for improvement is called sharing a wish. Usually during each presentation, our students filled the Zoom screen with reactions of hearts and stars while listening, to show appreciation and encouragement to their peers. We closed every session by asking ourselves, “How are we ending this session?”

For Mileydy, the creative writing learning experience was especially impactful. We discussed how words are something to take care of and how they are powerful leadership tools to help both youth and adults understand the unspoken realities of children in education. Through each session and each activity—modeled after writing workshops at Harvard University—all of the eighteen students in the module were in awe of their own creative abilities. They chose, word for word, how to render different scenes related to education that made obscure places come to life. Many of them said, “I didn’t know I had a writer in me.”

On Friday, January 28, the final session of creative writing arrived. Mileydy, who always kept her camera off, said in her soft voice: “I would like to say something before I start. What impacted me from the first

session was the quote from Gabriel García Márquez—the Colombian writer—who said, “when I want to write something it is because it deserves to be told. Moreover, it is a story that I would like to read.” Then, while letting out a gentle laugh, she said, “I’m a little nervous.” Then she read to us her piece. A short story called “Kaori: even kids face and grow through pain.” During those eight minutes, not a star, nor a clap, nor a heart appeared on any screen. I can only assume that, just like me, the other student leaders were also holding their breath. The session ended, and an avalanche of stars and well-wishing took over the screen. The story written by Mileydy will stay with me for the rest of my life.

In these five weeks of learning experiences, as with Mileydy, I witnessed how each student flourished with freedom, equity, and community. They chose freely from this initial array of tools they had accessed. Anglley, from Ancash, was a masterful facilitator and in a fifty-minute session was able to convince eighty adults to listen to their students’ voices to change education. Iris, from the Amazon, created a beautiful portrait of the scientist Marie Curie and masterfully mapped her areas of competence and habits of mind. Kerlly started researching about María Enrique, one of the first Peruvian women who had access to school. Almost always, our sessions ended with me leaving someone as the host of the call because they wanted to continue to share within a safe environment.

The other part of the Summer Residence was the portfolio, which extends through the whole year. Starting in January, student leaders were asked to think of a group of impactful projects in education they would like to develop during the year. We shared with them that planning and implementing these projects was the core of their experience from March until December and that four times a year (February, June, August, and November) they would create an inspiring presentation about the growth of their leadership for education.³ We also shared that every decision about their projects—including the why, what, how, who, with whom, or even changing a project itself—would be their own decision as long as their passion was still alive. To support them through this journey, they had access to one-to-one mentorship meetings with me whenever they wished⁴ to evolve their planning and implementation; connections with national

³ Students choose the format of presentation and their specific date. Flexibility is applied when students have aggravating circumstances that prevent them from presenting.

⁴ All of my students have access to my calendar through Calendly, and they choose when to have a meeting and for how long (from fifteen minutes to an hour).

and international educational leaders in whom they sought additional advice about their projects and leadership journey; and twice-a-month sessions where they would gather with their cohort to talk about the challenges of exercising leadership in education. During these meetings we talked about courage, happiness, leading with dignity, and other topics all centered on leadership.⁵

Addison, a sixteen-year-old from Junín, provides a good example of how this system works. During our first mentorship meeting of the year, in January, I said enthusiastically, “Hey, Addison! How are you doing?” She quickly opened her microphone and said, “Good, Franco,” and then promptly muted the microphone. I could only see the screen with her middle name, Yadhira. After a few minutes of warm-up, I asked, “So, have you given any thought to the projects you want to implement for your portfolio?” “I don’t know,” she said hesitantly. “Maybe you could give me some guidance?” she added and immediately muted her microphone. “Well, why don’t we start by this?” I said while laying back on my chair, “What really moves your heart when you look at education in your community? What is it that you would like to change?” This time the microphone did not unmute as fast. “Well, there is a lot of cutting,” she said. “What do you mean?” I said. “I have some of my peers who *do cutting*,” she said while I realized that she was referring to students who engaged in self-harm. “I wish every student in my region had access to emotional support.” It was the birth of one of the projects of her portfolio. In this program, our students are in command of their learning experience. The curriculum is the collection of their individual and collective purposes for common good and manifests as their projects to upend education as we know it today. These projects are disruptive for many adults, first of all because they are led by students themselves (in contexts where everybody is used to having adult-led innovation), and second because they are ideas that try to remake how learning happens. That implies that we as adults must be prepared to be partners on their journey to try to make education better with their own hands. Sometimes this implies lending a pair of helping hands, sometimes it implies letting go and allowing them to lead.

⁵All sessions are adapted for zoom but also for Whatsapp to make it accessible for student leaders who live in rural areas and do not have strong access to the internet. Students can advance in the sessions at their own pace, but they do have to reflect on the material of at least seventy-five percent of the fourteen leadership sessions from May to November.

Our program is adaptive, with flexible structures. We want our leaders to have a transcendent life experience. We refuse to force students to adapt to our program structures, where the only thing that might transcend is the lack of empowerment. Here is an example.

The first area of flexibility our students access is about the “what, where, and why.” Each student selects their own original impact project, the population and place where it will take place, and why the project matters to them personally. We work at “intersections”: the intersection between environment and early childhood, the intersection between teenagers and cybersecurity; the intersection between student voice and data use. Any crosspoint gives birth to a project that will change lives here and now. They just have to comply with one requirement: that the project ignites the “fire” within each of them to give their best in service to a group of students. If they want to change one of their projects, we pivot rapidly and decisively to preserve the “fire within.”

The second area of flexibility is about the “who.” While we have one mentor for every twenty students, they have our entire network at their disposal. When they need to receive specific advice about their projects, or even if they are wondering about their future, we help them have transformational conversations (without us). You want to know about girls’ education? We’ll get you that meeting with a cool expert from Spain. You want to know what are your options to build an interactive story? We’ll get you that meeting with the experts. You want to write a book about education? We’ll get you a meeting with an editor. We can do that because our network at Enseña Perú spans sixty-one countries and more than sixty fields of expertise. We want them to go out of the program with a more diverse and more consolidated network of relationships that will be allies for them in the future of their efforts. We generate the link; they decide when and how to meet.

The third area of flexibility is about the “how and when.” The curriculum of the twenty-first-century skills can be delivered in three ways: “live” in modules, asynchronously through Whatsapp, or in conversation with the mentor (phone or videoconference). The objective is for them to access and use the skills and do so in a manner that is empathic with their life situation. We have students in rural areas with low access to the internet, with many family responsibilities, in the midst of applying for that valuable scholarship, and this flexibility removes barriers to flourish in the program. On the other hand, they each decide autonomously when to apply and exercise the skills, and the projects provide perfect and

personalized opportunities for that choice. Finally, their portfolio presentation dates are decided by them, so they can choose a time when they are emotionally and cognitively ready to present and do so to the best of their abilities. Again, it is not about our times, it's about theirs.

Our mentors are DJs of skills, Bridges of people. Their words echo as a gentle breeze that takes care of emotions. And their energy is the seed that mother bird plants inside her hatchlings, to help them take those first leaps.

It is June 29, 2022. Their first portfolio presentation, and they each share with all their peers how they grew during their leadership toward education.

It is Addison's turn to present. Her camera is turned on. Through the screen, she shows a presentation colored in pink, and portrays landscapes with cartoon bunnies and bears, and with her name displayed in kindergarten playing blocks. At sixteen years old, one of her projects was changing her school's use of data to improve instruction and classroom climate for everyone. She wanted to lead the creation of a student-led system that would gather data directly from them. Next she analyzed the data and then discussed the findings with the teachers and her principal about the kinds of improvements that could be implemented in the classroom. She took a commonly used teacher tool for classroom management and gave it a different use: "This is my second project. What you see in front of you is the image of a traffic light, a device typically used on us students to evaluate our behavior during class. You get a green light if you are behaving well. I thought, *what if we, the students, used the traffic light to evaluate our own teachers and make improvements? What if my whole school had a system for improvement?* I talked to my principal and to other students, applied the skills from our program, and now we have a system in my school where students tell me weekly how much they loved the class—green if they really loved it, yellow if they liked it so-so, and red if they did not like it. My role as a student leader is to gather the data, discuss it with teachers and the principal and then reach agreements on how to improve for everyone. Through this system, we found out from students that they were afraid to speak their minds during lessons and were also afraid to embrace their mistakes as opportunities to learn. So, for the first time in my school, me, a sixteen-year-old student, was asked to conduct a workshop for the forty-three teachers of my school to help them provide a better experience for students. Here is a picture of me training all the teachers of my school! " Avalanches of hearts and stars.

Up next is Mileydy, also with her camera turned on. “Things didn’t go as expected. I did not write a great story. I wanted to write to change peoples’ minds about what students really live through narrations that generated awareness in the readers about the lives of teenagers. I worked hard in the hopes of studying animation, but instead, I was accepted to study hotel business administration. But I remembered the session about leadership and courage and decided to act courageously and turn to my origins. My mother has always supported me, but my father ... my father has always been ... has always had a temper at home. I decided to spend more time with him during these weeks, get to really know him, and try to value him. I never did that. I understand now that they both have contributed to how I face adversity and embrace education. I understood where he came from, the why of his virtues and his shortcomings. I wish more students could go through this process of self-knowledge that made me grow as a leader. I remembered the quote from the lady, I don’t remember her name, in the learning experience of creative writing, who said that part of this journey is going to dark places and bringing them out into the light. I think I have done that in these weeks. To pay back this learning, I decided that this July I will become a student guide and advise eight teenagers through their journey of self-discovery in the virtual sessions that I lived, less than a year ago.” Avalanches of hearts and stars.

It is Sunday, July 10. The last day of the second portfolio presentations. I open Zoom, and Mileydy comes in first, with her camera turned on this time, and Camila, another student leader joins in. I asked them both, “So how was your first session as a student guide?” Mileydy doesn’t say anything. She puts a heart on the screen and opens her arms wide while smiling as if embracing the universe.

With each passing month, I grow in my belief that a truly democratic education is within reach of humanity in the next two to three decades. But there are some ingredients that have to fit into the design of educational programs around the world. First and foremost, every adult involved in developing democratic education with teenagers has to unlearn all their previous notions about the role of students in education. No magic will happen unless adults are able to see each and every day a young person as a leader for today’s world, not—as people like to say—the future of our society. This is a profound shift in mindset that impacts all planning and implementation of education.

The second ingredient is that the curriculum has to be composed of the choices of students themselves, accompanied by relevant skills for them to

thrive, learn, and love the journey. What would happen if each student truly pursued growth in activities that gave them purpose? How much inspiration and motivation would we witness from each of them?

The third and last ingredient is that with this approach of learning, based on purpose and a mindset of student leadership, a whole country can almost “overnight” discover thousands of inspirational leaders for their nations. In these months, we have received over three thousand applications from teenagers across the twenty-four regions in Peru. There is not only enormous hunger on behalf of teenagers to do good for others, but I’ve come to believe that there is an excess of leadership in each of our classrooms that need not remain unseen.

Whenever I think about democracy, the history of nations like mine, and education, I recall a line from a beautiful poem by the activist and writer Maya Angelou, which says: “history despite its wrenching pain cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.” This cannot be more true for education. There has been a pain in the hearts of students, especially teenagers, and I believe that with courage we can heal that pain and rekindle the love for learning—and life—in millions of students. I know we can.

In my experience, democratic education is based on the belief that in classrooms today, there are people capable of making decisions to positively impact others, to participate in society, to keep their head up, their words powerful, and their deeds purposeful. Those are our students; let’s honor their potential.

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Educating Students to Think, Feel and Behave Democratically: Study Hall Educational Foundation (SHEF)—A Magical Space of Possibility

Urvashi Sahni

In August 1947, India threw off the colonial yoke and became independent. On 26 January 1950, we enacted, adopted and gave to ourselves a constitution, declaring ourselves a democratic republic. Our constitution, one of the finest in the world, holds as its core values equality, liberty and fraternity. Seventy-two years later, in 2022, our country is still struggling to achieve its constitutional promise of democracy. Patriarchy is still firmly intact. I have borne the brunt of it in my own life, as described later. India, ranking 140 on the gender gap index (“WEFs Gender Gap Index: India Slips 28 Places, Ranks 140 Among 156 Nations,” 2021), has a female workforce participation rate of just 21% (Misra & Saha, 2021). The literacy rate for women in India is only 65.46%, while for men it is 82.14% (*Profile—Literacy—Know India: National Portal of India*, 2021). India

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has recorded an average of eighty murders of women and seventy-seven rape cases daily in 2020 according to the National Crime Records Bureau report. In India, only 13.3% of Members of Parliament and 8% of Members of Legislative Assemblies are women (Radhakrishnan, 2019). Though our constitution abolished untouchability, caste-driven discrimination of many kinds still abounds; a scheduled caste (SC) person faced crime every ten minutes in India, cumulating to a total of 50,291 cases registered in 2020, an increase of 9.4% from the previous year, according to data from the National Crime Records Bureau (Jyoti, 2021).

Our democratic republic is still ridden with feudal practices and mindsets, especially in the area of gender and caste. We are trying to build a democratic country with feudal mindsets! No wonder we are in trouble. While our founding parents gave us a great constitution, they did not take the next critical step—educating our population for democracy. It was a great opportunity to deconstruct feudal mindsets and habits of the mind and build egalitarian, more democratic ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. I believe schools and classrooms are magical spaces of possibility, provided we allow the magic into them.

OUR FEUDAL INHERITANCE

We were a collection of feudal monarchies before the British colonized us. A feudal monarchy themselves, they only reinforced our feudal system. We also inherited our public school system from them. Far from being democratic spaces, schools, like all our other public institutions and corporations, were structured hierarchically, with power being clearly held by the teachers and administrators. Learning was examination-driven, and a top-down, rote learning-based pedagogy was practiced. Despite several policy changes and three National Education Policies (1968, 1986 and 2020), which were all (especially the most recent one in 2020) eloquent about democratic ways of teaching and learning and prescribed learner-centric pedagogies, the situation on the ground tells quite another story. Whereas the public school system, which serves about 50% of the school-going population,¹ is very broken with extremely poor learning outcomes—only 50.8% of children in third grade could read first grade level text (ASER, 2019)—the private school system includes a vast range of schools in terms

¹The percentage of students attending government schools has declined steadily from 2012–2013 when it was 57.3%.

of quality, economic structure and fees, from a few dollars a month to hundreds, and so serves lower- and middle-income families as well as the wealthy.² Barring the very small number of elite schools or innovative NGO-run schools, most schools continue to be extremely undemocratic in terms of both structure and pedagogy.

STUDY HALL EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION (SHEF): WHY IT WAS BORN

I am a daughter of refugees. They were refugees from what became Pakistan—because they are Hindus and it was not safe to continue living there. Fearing for their lives, both my parents had to flee along with their families, separately, leaving their homes behind when India was cruelly partitioned by the British, in 1947. They were married on 30 January 1948, the same day that Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated! My mother was sixteen and my father was twenty. At fourteen, my father lost his father and then was forced to abandon his schooling in order to don the patriarchal mantle of the family head. At eighteen, my father was orphaned and rendered homeless at twenty. I was the daughter of a strong patriarch. My father settled in Pune, which was more than 1500 km away from his land of birth and equally distant and strange in terms of language and culture. Trying to find his own moorings in an alien place and culture, he clung to his own tenaciously and raised me with strict standards, “appropriate for girls and women.” I was to be an obedient, devoted wife, a good mother and a dutiful daughter-in-law. Education did not play an important role in this plan for me. As my family grew in wealth and status, I was sent to a high-quality private girls’ convent school, as was the practice for girls of my social class. Though academically sound, the school was conservative in its pedagogical and philosophical approach—our school motto was “I serve.” I graduated from my school in 1970 at the top of my class and was sent to an all-girls Home Science college, much against my wishes. One year into the college, a suitable boy was found for me and I was engaged

² As of 2020, the percentage of private schools in India was 22.4% while they serve 37.1% (9% in 1993) of the school-going population. According to a survey by Schoolnet in 2022, Indian parents spend approximately Rs 8000 per year on school tuition fees in government schools and Rs 27,000 if their child is studying in a private unaided school. A family with a monthly income of Rs 20,000–50,000 might pay Rs 2000–10,000 a month on private school tuition fees.

at the age of seventeen, married soon after and shipped off 1000 km away to Lucknow, with an incomplete college education to a city which was culturally very different from the one I grew up in and, most importantly, where I knew NO ONE.

I managed to home-school my way to a college degree and later to a master's degree because I was determined to have an education. I also became a mother to two lovely daughters, who sadly received a very luke-warm welcome, because a boy was expected and preferred. Reluctantly, but determinedly, I tried to be the good wife, mother and daughter that I was raised to be. In August 1982, the tragic suicide/murder of my younger cousin, also educated in the same school as mine, ripped my comfortable, traditionally "safe" world apart. She was burnt to death in her own home, most likely by her own husband and in-laws, though it was passed off as a suicide. Shocked and bewildered, I could not sit and do nothing. I started an organization to help women in distress called Suraksha. In the course of my work, I began to conduct awareness workshops with young girls in schools and colleges. It was in dialogue with them that I realized how disconnected their education was from the reality of their life and how little it prepared them to navigate its gendered terrain—JUST like my own education! Like my cousin and me, they were shortchanged by their education, which gave them many academic skills, but did not give them the important knowledge that they had the right to use this education to become the drivers of their own lives. I began to think critically about my own education and my own life, and this is how I began my journey as an educator and as a feminist.

I began to read about alternative schools, thinkers and proponents of alternative education like J. Krishnamurthi, Rabindranath Tagore and John Dewey, among others. My inquiry led me to the Krishnamurti School in Varanasi, where I met Ahalya Chari, an educator, who befriended me and encouraged me to start a school. I reared back in alarm, "NO! That's too big an undertaking! And I'm not qualified—no education degree!" "But you have all the right questions!" she replied encouragingly.

A couple of years later, in January 1986, very nervously, Study Hall School was born in my garage with six children. Armed with my question—"What is an education that will respond to the learners' needs and life? Enable and help them to live their lives joyfully, respectfully and successfully?"—I set about learning from the children, even though they were just three years old, and from the teachers. My own ignorance and absence of a formal degree in education proved to be a boon. There was

nothing to unlearn, and I was willing to start from scratch. I looked very attentively at the children. What did they want to learn, and how did they want to learn? I wrote the school charter a year later and the first line reads, “*Children are unique, powerful, important persons, worthy of our respect. They have a right to enjoy their childhood, which is an important phase of their lives in itself and deserves to be understood respectfully rather than treated simply as a preparation for adulthood.*” This recognition of children’s rights in education was our first step away from the feudal conception of education. It affected a power shift in the traditional hierarchy, away from the teacher to the child, and led to a more egalitarian construction of the classroom and consequently of teaching and learning.

FAST FORWARD TO 2022

Today, Study Hall Education Foundation (SHEF) has transformed 1040 schools, trained 100,000 teachers, impacted the lives of 5,000,000 children and reached out to 20,000,000 community members, through its network of schools, teacher training programs, community-based learning centers and partnership with government schools. Our vision reads thus: To educate everyone for gender equality, social justice, personal flourishing and active democratic citizenship!

Born out of a democratic urge, with the goal of giving the learner center stage, SHEF has grown into an inclusive, democratic space, for children (ages three onward) and young adults, from all castes, classes and genders, different abilities, from rural and urban neighborhoods in and around Lucknow. We run four formal K-12 schools, with integrated programs for children with special needs, an undergraduate degree college and 148 community-based non-formal learning centers.

HOW IS SHEF A DEMOCRATIC LEARNING SPACE?

SHEF is democratic in three primary ways. (1) It has a democratic power structure (2) It is inclusive. (3) We have intentionally created curricula and pedagogies that help students think critically about the social and political structures and norms that frame their lives and guide their relationships. We intentionally and deliberately help them deconstruct traditional feudal mental constructs and reconstruct democratic, egalitarian conceptual frameworks instead.

1. *A democratic structure:* From SHEF's very inception we have adopted a very clear *consultative style of leadership*. All policies and decisions are made in full consultation with teachers and students. For example, we decided to abandon the practice of end-of-year exams in our second year, after a series of consultations with the teachers and with due consideration of how our students, still only three to five years old, responded to exams and their absence. There is a distributed power structure. Team leaders have full autonomy in their own units. Teachers have a high degree of liberty to decide their course content within a broad framework and work in groups and teams. Teachers are engaged in ongoing professional development, which again is very participatory in nature. The leadership functions on a strong ethic of care. As Siddharth, one of our young leaders, says: "I have been groomed into caring for everyone at my workplace as one of my own. Care and personal attention have become central to my own style of leadership." We call SHEF a Universe of Care, where everyone should be caring and should feel cared for as a person with intrinsic value.

Voice: Every last person in the organization feels heard. Students elect their own student council to represent them and serve as their voice to the administration. Classes are very interactive and teachers make a special effort to build a close, caring relationship with students. Students are enabled to find their voice and use it to express themselves. One of the "criticisms" aimed at us is that our students are very happy in school, have too much freedom—not disciplined (read obedient) enough—and talk far too much. They have strong opinions on everything and ask too many questions! Parents are encouraged to participate and speak up too. Everyone has easy access to the leadership, who is expected to be available and responsive. As one of the teachers comments, "Here, first it's about empowering the child, teaching them how to speak up [have a voice] and not stay silent, having an understanding of what's right and wrong, and being alert about their rights." Khushboo, an alumna, talks about the personal and social impact of finding her voice: "So, I am empowered, I want that [for other girls]. However far my voice can go, if there is any girl, anywhere, who wants to speak up, raise her voice, by hearing my story she can learn that she can also change her life, like I did, and go forward."

2. *We are an inclusive organization:* We have intentionally reached out to students from all classes, castes, religions, genders and abilities. We understand and practice inclusion by centering students' lived experiences and ensuring that everyone feels a sense of belonging—a feeling “at home.” We are the leading school with a fully integrated program for learners with different abilities. We also invite and organize parental engagement and participation regularly.
3. *The use of critical pedagogies (critical feminist pedagogy in particular):* This is pervasive in our entire organization with students, their parents and teachers. I believe this critical pedagogy is our unique and most innovative offering to education. We believe that lessons of equality are just as important as lessons of science, math and language. We have developed curricula to enable critical dialogues and discussions around gender for boys and girls and around caste for people of all castes (in progress at the time of writing). Critical dialogues are a regular part of our official curriculum. We have special classes for these every week, and they also pervade other subject classes. Critical pedagogy is used for all subjects. Furthermore, these curricula have emerged as a result of a democratic process—from dialogues with students. It was born out of dialogues with students from our Perna School (part of our SHEF network)—a school for very marginalized girls—mostly Dalits and poor, 50% of them forced to work in order to supplement family incomes. We work with students first and develop the curricula based on the conversations with them. This makes them co-creators of the curricula.

Apart from our critical dialogues, which are embedded in the performing and visual arts, our schools practice a critical pedagogy in all our classrooms, where students are encouraged to bring in their lived worlds into the classroom and make their learning relevant to their lives, by sharing stories from their lives and making these the context in which they learn other content also. We center these dialogues around four main issues: class, caste (race), gender and secularism. For example, seventh grade students in Study Hall, which caters to middle-class urban children mostly, were asked to measure and derive the area of their own bedroom and derive the person per square foot ratio. They were also asked to do this for one of their Perna friend's homes. They then discussed their findings in class during their critical dialogues, where many questions about class inequality and their own unearned privilege were raised and discussed.

This helped them understand a lived inequality between their lives and those of their poorer friends empathetically—the centerpiece of critical dialogue.

In these contexts, students are empowered to ask critical questions such as: “Who am I and how am I related to the universe and others in it?” Throughout their learning, students seek answers. Moni, an alumna of our Perna school, speaks to this: *“I feel I can now become someone, anyone I want to be. I have learned I can fight for my rights. I learned in school that I have the right to take decisions about my life. Today I have convinced my parents that I can make my own decisions. Now they discuss things with me. Society is like a wall for girls. It does not let us do anything, doesn’t let us grow. I know now that this is unfair and society should change, let us progress, hear us. I have learned that I can speak up when I see something wrong and I have the confidence to do that.”* Mona’s words reflect what I believe is the main purpose of education.

These critical dialogues and our critical pedagogy are key to developing democratic habits of the mind in our students, teachers and parents. Being able to think critically is one of the key intellectual qualities required of democratic citizens, without which we cannot have robust democracies. It is only a democratic political system that allows people the freedom to engage in critical conversation. This being said, a democracy also requires its citizens to have the skills needed for them to function as autonomous equal persons. We must educate our youth accordingly, failing which we fail not just our students but also democracy. I describe our critical feminist pedagogy in the following section, with specific reference to our Perna School, where it was born and is used with great impact.

Critical feminist pedagogy: This pedagogy aims to raise girls’ critical consciousness of oppressive social norms, power structures and the gender relations that impact them. This approach enables students to “name” their condition in a patriarchal world, to see how it is historically and socially constructed, therefore contrary to popular belief, not natural or God-given, and to imagine an alternative self and life in a newly possible egalitarian social order and, most important, work toward realizing it.

In a discussion on domestic violence with eighth grade girls, they were split up into small groups and asked to present an improv drama of what domestic violence looked like in their homes. They presented various scenarios—some of them showing physical abuse of mothers by their fathers; others showed emotional violence caused by refusing them free movement and enough food and denial of education. After this, we discussed each

scenario, to see what was really going on. In the discussion around the father abusing his wife, the teacher asks the students, “And did the mother retaliate?” The students laughed self-consciously, responding almost with one voice, “Of course not!” The teacher probed further, “And why not?” “Because our society doesn’t allow it.” “A wife can’t hit her husband.” “Even if she is being beaten?” the teacher asked. “Yes! It’s just not considered right for a woman.” The discussion then turned to why that was the case. Who was “society” and who made these rules? And were these rules fixed in stone? How fair were they? Could they not be changed? The teacher tells the students about the law against domestic violence and how it is recognized as a crime. The students are led in this way to think of solutions to the problem. How can this change? Who can change what? The teacher’s role is to ask difficult questions and help students arrive at their own understanding of the situation and the inherent power dynamic, finally imagining an alternative one.

While a strong focus on gender equality and justice permeates all the curricular and extracurricular activities, weekly special empowerment classes are included as part of the official curriculum. During these classes, girls learn to examine the systemic discrimination and oppression they face and are empowered or learn to act individually and collectively, to become self-advocates and to challenge unfair social structures. We believe girls must acquire this important knowledge if their education is to succeed in helping them achieve better life outcomes (Sahni, 2017).³

Impact on our girls: Our girls from Prerna have been empowered to view themselves as equal autonomous persons and to act accordingly. Prerna Girls School’s retention rate is 95% (according to the data shared by the Indian education ministry in 2019, the national average for retention rate at the higher secondary level in government schools was only 40.17%) (Krishna, 2021), and 92% of Prerna graduates have transitioned to higher education (the gross enrollment ratio in higher education in India was only 27.1% in 2019) (Kalita, 2021). They have become decision-makers in their own homes and role models for other girls in the community. Several of them have managed to delay their marriages and have become entrepreneurs, and are running their own businesses, middle-level executives, lawyers and more. They have also carried the message forward into their communities.

³For a more detailed account please see my book: Sahni, U. (2017). *Reaching for the Sky: Empowering Girls Through Education*. Brookings Institution Press.

We also conduct monthly meetings with parents and hold similar critical dialogues with them. This is our effort to deconstruct feudal, patriarchal mindsets in parents too, so that they may become allies in their daughters' struggle for an autonomous life as an equal person. We do face opposition from our parents in this, though not as much as one would imagine. One of our students' fathers lashed out at his daughter Khushboo, as she was defying him when he wanted to marry her off, while she wanted to finish her high school education: "It's this education that has given you these teeth of rebellion." Khushboo did prevail and today she has a master's degree and earns her own living. Over the years, not only has our enrollment grown steadily from 80 students in the first year to 1100 in 2022, but due to the persistent efforts of our teachers and alumni, more and more fathers are taking an active interest in their daughters' education. It is possible that part of the reason for our success might be that parents, especially fathers, do not fully realize the subversive potential of our critical pedagogy.

Working with boys: We realize that our mission to achieve gender equality through education is incomplete without working with boys. In the last seven years we have used our critical feminist pedagogy with boys too. Our message during our critical dialogues is very clear: "Boys, while patriarchy is not your fault, it gives you unfair power and privilege and is very cruel to your mothers, your sisters and all the women you love. It also lays undue pressure on you. So what can you do to change how you live and behave as boys and men and how you relate with the women in your life?" We work with boys to deconstruct their patriarchal socialization, build empathy in them and a sense of fairness, and encourage them to become advocates for their sisters' rights, to help in the domestic chores at home equally with them and to develop a respectful perception of women as equal persons. Though this transformation is more challenging and takes longer than it does with girls, we have achieved very encouraging results. Interestingly, we have received pushback from mothers. One mother stormed into the principal's office, "I don't want you to tell my son he should do housework! He will not do this menial work! That is his sisters' duty!" We take this as an opportunity to talk to the mother and have a critical dialogue with her. Often it does work—and sometimes it takes many such conversations. We have found, though, that our students are the best advocates as they take their class dialogues to their homes, continuing these discussions with their families. We also have specific activities to facilitate these discussions at home: for example, "interview your

mothers/fathers,” and “discuss with your parents and see how they feel and think about higher education for girls.”

SHEF’s India’s Daughters Campaign: “*We think we should share with other girls and women and our larger community what we have got from our education. We have become strong and can resist, fight, but others can’t. They haven’t learnt to think like us. So what can we do? We want to do something.*”—Laxmi, an alumna of Prerna.

What began as a series of student-led critical dialogues in people’s homes in 2011 has become a full-blown public awareness and advocacy campaign, which we call India’s Daughters Campaign. Our students and alumna go house to house advocating for girls’ rights, run signature campaigns, march in the community and perform street plays to engage the community in dialogue about issues like child marriage, domestic violence, toxic masculinity and women’s citizenship. India’s Daughters Campaign over the last decade has been able to engage over 2500 schools, raise 500,000 children and reach over 2 million community members and also has been successful in getting the buy-in of 8600 government officials. This social action has had a great impact on our students: “This really made me feel my voice counts. I count. People in Guari *Gaon* (an urban village) have taken note of this movement; they have taken note of us. They think of us as persons who they can turn to for help and persons who can effect change. No one, especially not school girls, has done this before—asked them these kinds of (hard) questions, or listened to them,” Sunita, one of the student leaders of the campaign, says.

Their parents have begun to perceive them similarly. Our continuous engagement with parents has led to the democratizing of their families as well. One father said, “I know I have changed. Daughters in my family were married at a very early age, but I won’t do that. I will let my daughters study and make something of their lives.” One of the mothers said, “Because of this school, I have seen change in my family and in my neighborhood. People’s mentality is changing.”

We work with mothers, helping them to construct a self-image of themselves as citizens with equal rights. Our message is very clear—in a patriarchal society like India, it is only their identity as a citizen that gives them equal status, not their religion, not their society and certainly not their families. One mother said, “We have learnt to speak up against violence. The atmosphere of my house has changed.”

IN CONCLUSION

We view the building of a democratic identity in our students—both boys and girls—and parents as a critical responsibility of our organization. This is done formally through the official curricula and pedagogies, but even more importantly through the democratic school culture that pervades the learning ecosystem. Students learn to be democratic because they experience a democratic learning space. They experience what it feels like to function in a diverse inclusive setting with others from very different cultural and economic backgrounds. They learn to navigate a diverse terrain and become more accepting and respectful of differences. They discuss equality regularly and understand it and develop egalitarian habits of the mind and heart. They learn to develop a strong voice and to use it to protest, to question, to critique and to participate in the conversations of their times. They learn to become democratic citizens and hopefully leaders too.

I believe that educators and educational organizations like SHEF have a key responsibility to help achieve fully functioning democracies. Education is a powerful social and individual transformative force, *provided* it is transformed. Our curricula and pedagogy should shift their focus from a transfer of decontextualized, depersonalized academic skills and content toward a focus on the social, emotional and political problems and issues of our times. Math, science, history, geography and language can all be taught in the context of these. Classrooms come alive when students are meaningfully engaged in thinking and imagining solutions for real living issues and problems. Growing up I wish my own school had been like this—engaging us and empowering us with these critical conversations about our lives. I wish our school had focused more on life outcomes and not only on learning outcomes.

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The School Systems Remix: Building Democratic School Systems Through Hip-Hop

Michael Lipset and Tony Simmons

This chapter is about a nonprofit, 4 Learning, and the school from which it was birthed, the High School for Recording Arts. The High School for Recording Arts (HSRA) was formally founded in 1998 by David “TC” Ellis, the first artist to release a major rap record in Minnesota and who eventually signed with Prince’s Paisley Park Records. The school’s origin story governs much of what we do today as a creative and democratic school and has also come to take on the challenge of supporting existing schools to better serve their students.

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Our origin began when Prince, the multi-instrumentalist, singer-songwriter, and Rock-and-Roll Hall of Fame inductee from Minnesota to whom TC was signed as a recording artist, changed his name to a symbol as a tactic to end the onerous relationship he and Paisley Park Record Label had with Warner Brothers Records. As a result, Prince's artists also became free agents, liberating TC to leave Paisley Park Records and open his own recording studio, which he named Studio 4 and was located in downtown St. Paul, Minnesota. As TC worked to operate a commercial studio and support other artists, he noticed a number of young people, mostly Black men, eager to use his studio but with no funds to rent the space. This occurred in 1997, six years after the nation's first charter school law, as fate would have it, passed in Minnesota.

One day, TC relented, and let some of the youth fill a timeslot left vacant by a truant client. He found the youth to be more talented than his older, paying clients. Yet, none of them were in school. Having been excluded from multiple schools and himself the product of St. Paul Open School, an early democratic public school, TC recognized an opportunity to design a unique, equity-driven approach to schooling that would fit a particular community need. Here were young people disconnected from school but who still wanted to learn and immerse themselves in the machinations of the music industry. They were bright, creative, and in need of a learning community that respected their voices and gave them agency. As a response to this situation, TC called his old principal and founder of the St. Paul Open School, Dr. Wayne Jennings. Jennings loved the idea of turning TC's recording studio into a school. He agreed to send TC a teacher from St. Paul Open School to pilot the model in TC's recording studio. Together, the two began an operation similar to recent attempts at pod schools and micro-schools—tiny organizations designed to provide personalized education programming.

What started as a pilot in 1997 with just over 10 students grew to 40 by the end of the year. After submitting a successful charter application in 1998, the school has grown to serve 370 students in the 2021–2022 academic year and responds to calls from schools across the US to support those schools in learning and doing what HSRA does best: democratic schooling for personalized learning through a social justice-oriented culture (hip-hop), the recording arts, the business of music and media, and other creative endeavors.

What makes HSRA democratic? Well, a student-centered academic model for one. This model sees each student working from a personalized

learning plan co-designed between their advisor, themselves, and their core content instructors. Students choose how they want to earn the credits they *need* to earn, whether by designing boats to be tested and iterated on in the neighboring swimming pool or curating albums that address issues of social justice, such as “Royalty,” the 2016 collaboration between the Sounds of Blackness and the High School for Recording Arts. This song was nominated that year for an National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Image Award. Unfortunately, the students lost to Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar.

The origins of the school help keep the school democratic. HSRA began its new journey by providing young people with an education that centers who they are, offering up an opportunity to be seen, heard, and felt in their place of learning. Studio 4, the studio out of which the school began, still serves as the school’s management organization, an innovative and unique twist on school management that helps the school maintain the centrality of the recording arts to student learning. Where most schools house studios somewhere within, at HSRA the studio runs the school, not the other way around. Due to the population we serve, we have also developed robust, proactive wraparound services that include support identifying housing solutions, mental health services, breakfast and lunch, extended days for students who can only make it in during the afternoon or evening, and help securing important legal documents like birth certificates, ID cards, and social security numbers. Since many students cannot come to school due to having to work to provide for their families, the school recently began offering paid, for-credit, on-campus internships through its student-run record label, Another Level Records, to help reduce barriers to access in education. The school is also now a member of the Teacher-Powered Schools initiative, signaling an investment in democratic decision-making at the leadership and teacher levels. Lastly, the school’s advisory model applies democratic practices that solicit student feedback and manage weekly school community meetings.

But, our people are our secret sauce. Over the years, our admirers have come to affectionately call us “Hip-Hop High.” Sure, we were started by a rap artist and serve students who, by and large, identify predominantly with hip-hop culture. But we’ve always said that we would be fine if we were no longer called Hip-Hop High if our students’ dominant musical and cultural preference stopped being hip-hop. Knowing our students, who they are, and where they come from, however, we doubt they will ever stop BEING hip-hop.

One of our most exemplary incorporations of hip-hop's values into student learning came during the pandemic when Walter Cortina, a first-generation student of migrant parents, lost his job. When he realized Minnesota wouldn't grant him access to unemployment benefits, he and his peers organized with the support of HSRA's flexible, personalized academic model to sue the state of Minnesota. They won and, as a result, more than 30,000 young people across the state gained access to over \$40 million in unemployment benefits and permanently reversed Minnesota laws that blocked access to these funds.

As we think about what it means to support schools in harnessing the best practices of the High School for Recording Arts through our newest nonprofit, 4 Learning, we have to think about culture and fit quite a bit. This has led to new questions being raised for us, but also for the field of hip-hop-based education. We admit we don't have all the answers yet, but hope that by sharing our experiences and the ways we're thinking about the questions themselves, we can help reach more youth in some small way. One such question that appears exceptionally complex is also a question that will come up repeatedly as we look to expand our work internationally. The question is, how does an American culture like hip-hop move in foreign countries? Is it possible that hip-hop could be seen elsewhere as a colonizing force, erasing local expressions of culture? Or, will hip-hop's cultural investments in social justice and anti-oppression serve to support the educational liberation of young people around the globe? We know the answers are likely somewhere in the middle. For example, in some countries with their own forms of revolutionary musical traditions, hip-hop might be construed as a uniquely American form of cultural production that might eclipse local art forms more germane to the local culture. To 4 Learning, the most important piece of the democratic process for us will be the ways in which 4 Learning works with local organizations to reason through these complexities to achieve analogous outcomes to those we have seen at the High School for Recording Arts.

We also find ourselves asking what it means to support schools that want to be like the 2022 version of HSRA without recognizing the last two-and-a-half decades of growth that brought us here. It took 25 years for HSRA to stand where it is today, bearing in mind that it was born in a much different political context than today's. Charter schools were still seen as the lab space for public schools and had not yet been painted as a political tool for conservative powers seeking to privatize public schooling. As a result, HSRA has to continue advocating for itself as a free, public,

innovative, pro-Black institution that's not out to privatize public education, but rather to serve the young people that no other schools have been willing to serve in Minnesota and beyond.

Lastly, through 4 Learning, to meet the needs of our clients we find ourselves working with schools to adapt a model designed for the reengagement of out-of-school youth to work in service of students enrolled in more traditional settings. In traditional schools, students who have not yet been so harmed by their schools that they have either had to leave on their own or be pushed out by the school itself do not respond to school the same way as students who see school as a threat to their existence, like so many students who have been pushed out before. At HSRA, we serve the latter and, by necessity, cannot look, smell, or feel anything like the "tradition." To do this work with comprehensive schools means democratically determining with those communities what will and will not work within their setting and context. It means advocating for the inclusion of students in these decision-making processes and bringing parents into these conversations and teachers who may not have been asked their opinion on major operational details before.

The growth we seek in those with whom we work does not come all at once. Therefore, rather than building entire schools with our 4 Learning clients, we build pilot recording arts programs within their existing organizations and place well-vetted local studio production and recording facilitators in their recording studios. From there, we work with schools to identify processes and practices that will work for their unique context and offer development support on how to engage students through interdisciplinary, phenomenon-based, student-centered learning. What it takes is an initial recording studio set-up, a well-trained studio facilitator, a school leader who supports the work, and at least one teacher willing to use the recording studio as a classroom. We simply plant the seed and help the community water it. The result is what we like to call 4 Learning's approach to hip-hop-based school systems change, or, the School Remix Program. As the pilot grows, we help the schools center student, parent, and teacher voice and choice in determining the direction of the program.

By leveraging the cultural values of hip-hop that we hold so dear in our own lives and work—aspects such as knowledge of self, authenticity, social justice, peace, love, unity, respect, and having fun—we bring a hip-hop-*informed* approach to school systems change. We don't, however, require our constituents to fully identify with hip-hop. In fact, to mobilize hip-hop's cultural values on behalf of young people one must only need a

reverence for the culture as the values are agnostic of the culture itself (Bridges, 2011; Emdin, 2016; Hall, 2011).

With this approach, hip-hop becomes just one of the tools through which change gets realized, as opposed to a requirement. It would be unethical for 4 Learning to insist on the incorporation of a culture (hip-hop) in a place where said culture does not already exist naturally. Hip-hop, for us, shows up in how we move and the values we bring to the work we do. It informs the logic behind our theory of change. As a result, key metrics of school change for the schools we work with become artifacts that demonstrate students are learning by doing and making, engaging in phenomenon-based learning, executing learning productions (Santo et al., 2019), advisory models for social-emotional learning, wraparound services to support the whole student, competency-based progressions of learning, weekly community meetings, and teacher/learner/family/community-powered decision-making processes. The where, how, and why of these design elements are then collaboratively decided upon between us and those whom we support. Our work thus facilitates a democratic *remix* of education within a given context.

The rest of hip-hop's cultural values can be mapped onto other best practices in democratic schooling as well. Advisory models support students in developing knowledge of self by focusing on the instruction of social-emotional learning and goal-setting. Learning by doing and making, as well as weekly community meetings, represents "having fun," and phenomenon-based learning does, too. Peace, love, and social justice, however, can be found in wraparound services to support the whole student, and learning productions focus on positioning young people as professional creative producers to explicitly and purposely address real-world problems.

Perhaps the most important hip-hop cultural value, however, could be that "game recognizes game." As we look for studio facilitators to support 4 Learning's remix schools, and as we think about the importance of teaching artists who possess particular competencies when working in schools with young people, our ability to know who's best equipped to play these roles cannot be undervalued. These folks become cultural brokers and boundary crossers capable of bridging the gap between young people and their schools and educational systems (Gay, 1993; Geertz, 1960; Jezewski, 1990; Lipset, 2021). In a world where school systems too often become hegemonic executors of state mandates as opposed to community hubs by and for the people, we look for individuals capable of

operating within schools in ways that center student voice and agency to become the protectors and holders of democratic schooling.

Lastly, and as we wrote in *Hip Hop Genius 2.0: Remixing High School Education*, the two authors of this chapter in collaboration with sam seidel (2022) called for educators to bumrush the system. In hip-hop, to *bumrush* something means to take it without permission. Like young people who can't afford a ticket to see their favorite artist, educators armed with the values of hip-hop culture know that to take "no" for an answer may mean the difference between a life-changing experience and business as usual. In a world where "business as usual" means a neoliberal world order, the audacity to know what you, your school, your students, and your community need and to take it without permission might just be the difference between life and death for your students. 4 Learning supports schools and school districts in doing just that by lifting up HSRA as a model that came out of a bumrush. TC bumrushed the system by piloting under the radar of formal education when he borrowed a teacher from a local public school. The leader of that public school, Wayne Jennings, helped him do it. Not all rules must be followed. In fact, in our current education system, some must be purposefully and thoughtfully broken. Democracies serve the needs of the greatest good. 4 Learning seeks to support schools and districts in being more democratic—through hip-hop.

Just like Prince did with Warner, and just like TC did with his original pilot version of HSRA, we adopt an approach to schooling that requires radical authenticity from our constituents and the willingness to take bold initiatives. Authenticity, in this case, refers to cultural competencies that meet the needs of our constituents' students, not the system. Democratic schooling is the mechanism that gets us there. As we go about our work, we push educators to reflect on their assumptions by centering student voices and the cultural legacies of young people. In what ways might your school need to change its name to a symbol? In what ways might your school respond to a real, unmet need in the community in order to reestablish relevance and grow roots deep underground, wherever you are? In what smart and strategic way can you initiate something that overcomes obstacles? Where's your Prince? Who's your TC Ellis? But, more importantly, where's the recording studio where your young people just can't wait to do the work of finding themselves?

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Let the Light In

Hannah Kehn

New Visions Charter High School for the Humanities IV (“HUM IV”) was founded in 2017 with New Visions for Public Schools in Rockaway Park, New York (see Image 17.1). Rockaway Park is located on a peninsula in Queens. Since 1989, New Visions has supported a network of public district schools and also operates a network of charter high schools in under-resourced neighborhoods of New York City. The majority of students who attend HUM IV live in an area of the Rockaway peninsula called Far Rockaway. HUM IV is a charter high school co-located in a building called Beach Channel Educational Complex with five other traditional public high schools, one middle school, and an alternative learning center. HUM IV is a unionized charter school. The campus serves approximately 3000 students. At the end of the school year 2021–2022, HUM IV was serving 300 students in grades 9–12, and there were 49 adults on staff. Demographics are as follows:

With collaboration from Oluwaseun Omoworare (class of 2022, currently attending Sophie Davis School of Biomedical Education, City College of New York).

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Image 17.1 Founding students and staff at New Visions Charter High School for the Humanities IV

- Staff: 42% white, 40% Black, 16% Hispanic, 51% male, 49% female
- Students: 62% Black, 31% Hispanic, 2.4% white, 1.9% Asian, 2.4% Native American, 25% students with individualized education plans, 5.2% multilingual learners, 52% male, 49% female

Due to its intentional programming and design, “artist-scholars” at HUM IV can earn an Advanced Regents Diploma with Designation in the Arts and/or a Seal of Civics.¹

* * *

I’m writing this chapter at a time when “issues impacting humanity” are undeniable and overwhelming. One of the only things that has brought me any sanity and purpose in moments like this is to turn to my work in

¹In New York State, Regents Examinations are statewide standardized examinations in core high school subjects. Students are required to pass these exams to earn a Regents Diploma. When students exceed basic expectations they can earn special honors.

education and to think about where I can leverage it to address systemic issues. I'm thankful for this direction. For if education doesn't serve as a training ground for individuals to learn how to work with others in strategic ways to accomplish a goal, then what hope can we have that our communities can overcome complex issues and thrive?

In 2017 when I founded "HUM IV" with 13 adult staff, 60 ninth graders, and New Visions for Public Schools, we endeavored to set the course to do just that. One of our starting places was to create a "pledge" which would serve to remind us of our mission, especially in moments when it is easy to forget. Early in our first year, we did sessions with students, families, and staff where they wrote sentences around our "Habits of the Graduate": commit, reflect, envision, act, trust, and excel. I still have a few of these Post-its on my refrigerator like this one from a founding student—"I take action in my work so I can make it a reality." I remember the floor of my apartment at the time covered with Post-its as I looked for themes across them. Eventually, we landed with a series of four lines which we call our CREATE pledge and one of them is "I act on my ideas to make the world a better place." (Image 17.2)

Hence, when the founding community envisioned HUM IV, a thread of civic engagement was sewn throughout every grade. The intention being that our artist-scholars will graduate with a sense of purpose, but also having had multiple concrete experiences in which **their ideas become reality**. As a result of our intentionality, in early 2021, we submitted an application to be one of the 50 high schools included in a pilot where students can earn a special "Seal of Civics" on their diploma. Students earn this Seal via a myriad of experiences for which they can earn points. In our pilot year, 47% of our graduates earned the Seal which we were tremendously proud of. I hope our continued efforts to make visible and document this work will continue to support other schools across the country to prioritize it. Starting with our own New Visions Network, in school year 2022–2023, four more charter high schools in addition to HUM IV can award Seals. I hope this chapter can serve to spotlight a few areas school leaders can get out ahead of; many of which I've only been able to recognize and see in retrospect.

* * *

One of my biggest learnings throughout the last five years has been that the most challenging part about promoting civics in schools is that most

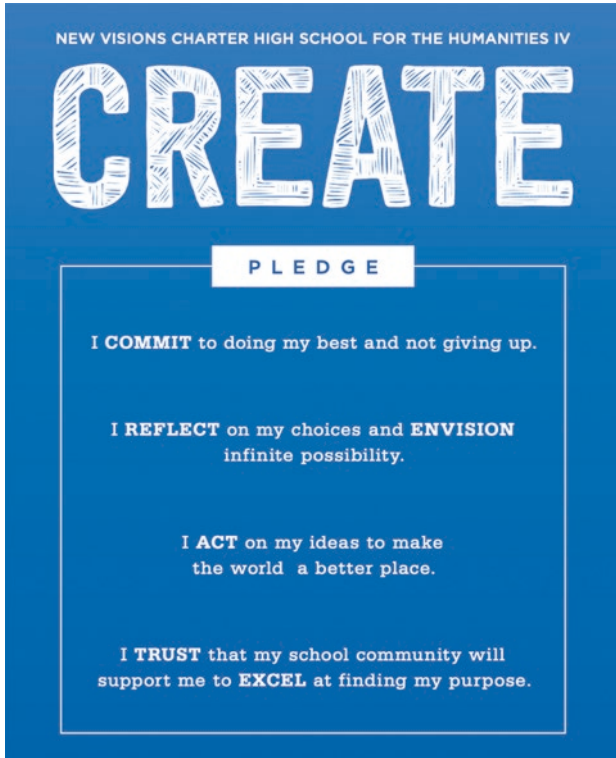


Image 17.2 HUM IV CREATE pledge created in 2017

adults themselves have had limited experience or actual training in this area. Not only does this help explain why oppressive and stagnant systems remain entrenched, but it also helps explain why bringing democratic education into schooling requires significant professional development for adults and not the kind you might imagine.

Before I get into that, let me explain in a bit more detail, our Senior Capstone process (SCP) which is a key experience that earns students points toward a Seal of Civics. SCP represents the authentic assessment of what it means to be an “artist-scholar” at HUM IV. This process begins with “Letters of Intent” in 11th grade; some of which are selected to manifest into full grant proposals at the beginning of 12th grade. In February, students present their proposals to a panel of judges from all

over the country and selected projects receive funding as per their proposal. In the final trimester of senior year, the authors of selected grant proposals form a committee of seniors and endeavor to make their vision a reality. Regardless of whether or not a student's Letter of Intent moves forward in our process, almost every senior by the time they graduate supports a Capstone project by serving on a committee. These projects demonstrate skills and learning from various content areas and experiences, and the arts are used as a tool to provoke the change or impact the author seeks to make. M. K. Asante is an author, filmmaker, recording artist, and professor who described the purpose of our Senior Capstone Projects well when he said: "the activist (artist +activist) uses her artistic talents to fight and struggle against injustice and oppression—by any medium necessary. The activist merges commitment to freedom and justice with the pen, the lens, the brush, the voice, the body, and the imagination. The activist knows that to make an observation is to have an obligation."

When reflecting with one of my teachers, Mr. Williams, on the Capstone process, he spoke about the challenge of supporting students grappling with the mindset that "they don't have the power to change things as students." Imagine the collective power possible if a large mass of young adults graduated from high school firmly believing in the power of their ideas *and* how to make them a reality *with* other people.

As the school leader who is point for SCPs, one of my priorities is to support adults as they plan supports for students. While our teachers are generally equipped to support students on the technical skills needed to complete the final project, the more challenging task as a coach is how to support the growth of my staff around civic knowledge and skills such as forming consensus, community outreach, identifying root cause, reflecting on bias and assumptions, presentation and defense of original ideas, strategic planning, and self-initiated and directed participation. These are areas often not emphasized in teacher preparation courses and often not prioritized in schools serving underserved communities. They are the very skills we see adults across our society struggle with when attempting to organize around an idea and a strategic tactic (Image 17.3).

* * *



Image 17.3 Founding artist-scholars tying messages to internal window fencing they find oppressive at Beach Channel Educational Complex where HUM IV is located

Our valedictorian in 2022, Oluwaseun Omoworare, won the second-ever “Maitra CREATE Award²” for the Senior Capstone Project that made the greatest impact. When I reflected with Oluwaseun at the end of the year, there were two things that stood out to me about our conversation. One was that she commented that “communities typically come together when something tragic happens” or to address a problem, rather than for something positive. She referenced an event in our community at the end of

²This is determined by Dr. Linda F. Nathan, whose Senior Grant Project at Boston Arts Academy was the inspiration for our version of this design element at HUM IV.

this year called the Rockaway Youth Summit where her Capstone project and others found an authentic audience. For her project *Let the Light In*, this looked like a table with a petition³ and workshop led by students in Oluwaseun’s committee to tell the story of how we have been trying for years to remove interior window fencing on second and third floors that students articulated fosters feelings of fear, confusion, and oppression on campus. The summit was held in Far Rockaway on a weekday when students did not have school.

Oluwaseun and her committee also gave a speech to the community at the Summit before performing an original dance that represents this issue and the change they want to see. “A lot of people [focus on] negative things because we grew up around negative aspects of life,” Oluwaseun went on to share with me. She reiterated it would be good for more people to create positive experiences like the Youth Summit in part because she felt it was a good experience for the entire adult team of our school to participate in (I directed my team to report there instead of for a typical PD day on campus as it was a no-contact day for students⁴) (Image 17.4).

Oluwaseun’s comments made me think about the purpose of our Senior Capstone Projects which states that students either “address a challenge or strengthen an asset” in a community of choice. In the two years we have created projects, they have all addressed challenges, but few have clearly articulated how they plan to strengthen an asset in order to do so. I think this speaks to the extent to which, when endeavoring to “make the world a better place,” we could do more to take a strengths-based approach. Unless we continue to generate enough hope and inspiration⁵ along the way, we will never be able to overcome the insecurity and skepticism Mr. Williams referenced. During the Rockaway Youth Summit, there was a moment when one of the students in Oluwaseun’s committee came up to me upset about an interaction they had with someone they didn’t feel was supportive of their idea. She had a real conversation in that moment with her counselor Mr. Pinkett to acknowledge that this often occurs during the tactic phase of civic engagement, and she was advised to

³You can access the petition via the QR Code in the reference portion of this chapter.

⁴Steps that made this possible include relationship-building with organizer(s), communication with superintendent, negotiation with the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), and facilitation of adult learning (inclusive of anticipating challenges).

⁵One way to generate hope and inspiration is to put a spotlight on assets in our communities (i.e. the work of community-based organizations) and to leverage them as we also address the challenges present.



Image 17.4 *Let the Light In* (SCP '22) performance at the Rockaway Youth Summit in 2022

collect her thoughts before re-engaging. Ultimately, the student decided to approach the individual again as a way of furthering dialogue. When I reflected with Mr. Pinkett on this, he told me that the whole experience made him feel “very happy and very proud.” That was notable to me, not only because of the growth we recognized in this particular student (i.e. she felt an *obligation* to engage with that man in a way that pushed his thinking), but also because so many initiatives we see on the adult level in our society are ineffective or fall flat because people lack the confidence and clarity to engage in the exchange of ideas that Philosopher Byung-Chul Han considers to be necessary for a stronger democracy that is dismantled by the prevalence of a “transparent society.” (Hal, 2012) (Image 17.5)



Image 17.5 *Let the Light In* committee members (Oluwaseun is center) collecting signatures on their petition at the Rockaway Youth Summit

I've also experienced the realization that the creation of HUM IV in and of itself is an attempt at civic engagement. Prioritizing purpose, action, trust, or imagination when discussing schooling in this country—specifically schooling that occurs in underserved communities of color—is not the norm. It is these aspects of an education that hold potential for individuals to feel powerful not only by what they learn but also by what is already inside of them waiting to be spoken, dreamed, and practiced. When we consider why priorities in education seem to often center on standardization and antiquated systems, we must understand that this is intentional. Whether we are talking about literacy or civic knowledge,



Image 17.6 Light entering the school building through windows without interior fencing

one's quality of education is a key ingredient in a healthy and empowering democracy (Image 17.6).

Since starting the school in 2017, the work to bring together a committed group of individuals dedicated to the same vision has been riddled with mistakes, disappointment, and loss, but also a lot of reflection. I am grateful to have witnessed so much growth. There is a terrific risk associated with attempting to create a learning community that espouses a goal related to making the world a better place or that values “design with purpose.” How do we protect these priorities when they are in direct conflict with the systems and priorities rampant in “a borrowed and colonized cultural existence” (Macedo, 2005)?

Regardless of the degree to which I understood what I was getting myself into when I signed on to build this school, I now understand that it has served as a literal simulation for adults of what we are trying to support our students to discover about themselves. It has been the opportunity of a lifetime to CREATE—“a problem-posing education where ‘men and women develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world...where they come to see the world not as a static reality but as a reality in the process of transformation’...it is a process that always involves pain and hope” (Macedo, 2005). We therefore must build

democratic schools where examples of hope supersede the pain that comes with challenging the status quo.

* * *

What are some implications for school leaders endeavoring to build capacity and investment in taking a democratic approach to education? Firstly, school leaders need to be transparent about the skills needed to become a civically engaged citizen in a democracy. Adults need a safe space to discuss their own experiences (good and bad) and comfort with these skills (during their schooling and after high school). It's everything from previewing the tension that can exist when facilitating consensus forming to the understanding that ideas or realities sometimes cause the original project concept to evolve over time. Adults need time to grapple with these potential moments and anticipate how they will proactively prepare and support. Students cannot be left alone in these complex moments. Rather, this can become a unique opportunity for adults and students to become collaborators in a learning experience (pure magic). As we continue to do this work and document it, we will have more concrete examples of Capstone projects to reference and use as case studies.

The following are a series of actions and understandings that I've experienced leading this work over the past five years, and I also believe they are valuable for all school leaders:

- I cannot assume that adults are initially comfortable or prepared to facilitate this work.
- We have partnered with an organization called Generation Citizen (GC) for five years that provides professional development and curricula to 10th grade advisors. I noticed a difference in the capacity of advisors during COVID-19 when GC professional development shifted to remote and advisors lost the experience of learning together with GC coaches both on and off site.
- I taught the grant writing course and planned with my teachers weekly in order to develop the scope and sequence and lessons that support our Senior Capstone process. In this way, I have been able to experience this design process first-hand (the technical *and* adaptive).
- There have been multiple times when I have had to challenge and motivate adults to step out of their comfort zone with this work; to

“envision infinite possibility” (see CREATE Pledge); and to find creative solutions to problems instead of giving up.

My potential to lead and navigate the above rests on my ability to speak from experience and to wrestle with issues *alongside* my teachers and students. I believe school leaders aspiring to challenge the status quo will benefit from these actions and experiences.

* * *

To close, as I previously stated, starting this school has felt like one big civics project. As I have tried to facilitate the same kind of creativity, courage, and collaboration that I’ve seen adults around me grapple with, I recognize the many times I didn’t fully anticipate a need or felt like giving up. It has not been easy when members of our team turned out less mission-aligned, or committed than I thought, but finding the right people to share this work with has been inspiring. There have been so many times when I drew on previous experiences I’ve had or mentors who have done similar work to anchor me in moments of doubt. Although that has supported me, I haven’t always been able to bridge the gap with everyone. I am so grateful to everyone who has contributed toward transformational experiences. They have filled my cup more full than words can express.

This is messy and complex work, but it is the essential work in which we all must engage. If not us, then who? If not now, then when? I hope you leave this chapter with at least the following three takeaways: (1) We can and must create school missions and design elements that set schools themselves up to be tactics to address systemic issues. (2) School leaders must prioritize providing adults with professional development related to civics skills and knowledge if they are to lead this charge with students. (3) For school leaders, it is critical to make the time and reflect on one’s experiences “in the trenches” of this work with all stakeholders. All of this is in service of promoting the agency of emerging generations to CREATE something unique and necessary. I believe this is the most powerful tool we have as citizens and educators (Image [17.7](#)).

Image 17.7 Access *Let the Light In*'s petition via this QR Code



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Start with the Learning Plan

Shannon Norquist

The Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center began over twenty-five years ago in Providence, Rhode Island. At its inception, it was a small school of fifty students, but over the next ten years, it grew in size to 700 students across five buildings. Today The Met model has been used in similar schools across sixteen different states and includes eighty international schools. While the Met began as a public and private community effort to bring transformative education to one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city, there is now an application process by which students throughout the state can be admitted to the school on a rolling basis. In 2007, a branch campus was opened in Newport, Rhode Island (“Our History,” 2013). Geographic spread means that the diversity of the school has also increased; however, the Newport campus is considered by students to be “the white school,” while campuses in Providence tend to be more black and brown. All of this exponential growth in a short period of time presents complex challenges. This is my second year working at the school, so I am here to pose some questions that are raised by my current context. I cannot hope to answer all of these questions based on my current level of experience, but as you consider what these ideas mean in your

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context, I hope that the transparency of my experiences can prove to be thought-provoking.

The Met is a public career and technical school at which teachers, or advisors, pass from grade to grade with their advisories for four years. Each advisory maxes out at sixteen students to one advisor. At present, there is no system of training in the United States by which a secondary teacher would be a generalist, meaning having the skills and knowledge to teach all subjects. I bring a background in teaching Spanish to my advisory, but I work with advisors who specialize in Math, Social Studies and English Language Arts. The primary role of the advisor is to help each student design an educational pathway that will best prepare them for their post high school goals. The pathway must include internships with professionals out in the community as well as classroom time. Direct instruction in this school tends to focus on literacy and current events with a pullout QR or quantitative reasoning class taught by a math professional. Students also design projects that support the learning that takes place at their internship sites. These projects are where some of the best interdisciplinary learning happens. There are no grades or high stakes testing. Rather, students demonstrate their learning by preparing three exhibitions throughout the year. At these exhibitions students are required to demonstrate evidence of their learning and project work before a panel of peers, school staff, family members and community mentors. The heart of these exhibitions is each student's learning plan.

Each of my sixteen students starts the year with a blank template titled "Learning Plan." In the first weeks of school, part of my role is to meet with each student and at least one family member to review this plan. We discuss what was accomplished in the last academic year and what gaps in learning the student hopes to prioritize in the upcoming school year. The core of the learning plan is real world experience, so the first question that I might ask at the beginning of the ninth grade is what this student likes to do in their free time. Then, together, we look for internship experiences where that student will be paired with a community mentor who works in a field that overlaps with at least one area of interest. In the course of a week, I spend three days with my students in our classroom space. These days are focused on the academic skills that will support the students in being successful in their internship experiences. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, ninth and eleventh graders leave the building for internship experiences, while Wednesdays and Fridays are the days for tenth and twelfth graders to learn through internships. Since my students are in

tenth grade this year, I spend Wednesdays and Fridays driving throughout the state to visit students at their various internship sites. I check in with them and their mentors on their growth in professionalism and workplace knowledge. We also discuss projects that students can take on that will deepen their learning while giving back to their community partner.

I love this work. I believe deeply that students are more motivated to engage in learning when that learning is driven by their passions. I believe in the power of relationships and community connections as vehicles by which young people are empowered to thrive in their future careers. Some of my students are college bound and will find their careers through the professional networks that they build in college and beyond. However, one important goal of the work that happens at The Met is that all students, regardless of their post secondary plan, learn the professional communication skills that will give them a leg up in pursuing their goals. We try to zoom out from our micro daily interactions with students to see how their internships and their individual learning fit into their larger life goals. All of this sounds beautiful and idyllic, but the truth is that it is messy, and I constantly worry that I am not providing my students with critical academic support.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic the majority of students in my advisory are reading at least two or more years below grade level. While most high school students in the United States receive at least five contact hours in English Language Arts each week, I am working to balance the three days that I am with students in advisory to meet with individuals as they develop their projects. I am expected to be a generalist who can support a student's academic growth by facilitating rigorous academic inquiry in the field with which their project most closely aligns. In order to be successful at their internship sites, students are expected to create projects that benefit their internships with real world impact. When a student is reading significantly below grade level or simply does not have the persistence to stick with a text or to commit to independent learning, it is very challenging for that student to complete meaningful research that will support their project work. When literacy levels are low, there is a barrier to students communicating effectively with their mentors via email.

Is three days out of the week enough time for literacy instruction? I also try to build time in those three days to meet with each student one on one. That one on one time is an opportunity for individualized academic support, personal catch up and provides an opportunity for the student and me to check in on their learning plan and make sure that the work

they are doing in their internships is aligning with their learning goals. At best, each week, I can squeeze in fifteen minutes of facetime with each student. It never feels like enough. The Met seeks to provide simultaneous support to students who are college bound alongside those who choose to focus on career preparation. Thus, my goal is to balance career preparation and real world learning experiences alongside growth in academic writing and reading skills. Regardless of a student's path after high school, written and oral communication will grant them greater opportunities for growth in their careers. How can one person ensure that their sixteen charges are sufficiently ready for the world that awaits them on the other side of graduation? The following stories highlight the tensions I have experienced in this journey to provide high quality democratic education. For me, it has been both complex and beautiful.

VIGNETTE 1

“What was your first impression of us?” It’s the last week of school, and my students and I are together completing our rookie year. This group of sixteen ninth graders are my advisory.

“My first impressions of you?” I respond with a smile in Luis’s direction. “Do you remember the conversation we had during Summer Infusion?” Summer Infusion is a program intended to prepare newly graduated eighth graders to embrace the philosophy of The Met. Over the course of three days, we play games to build community and help students to warm up to working with their future advisory. We talk about what real world learning means, and students are pushed into their first public speaking venture. I remember walking the grounds of the school with my advisory on a steaming morning in June while Luis explained to me that this school was going to be a fresh start for him. He had gotten into trouble during middle school, and he didn’t plan to repeat that pattern here. By October, we would be walking this same path and recalling this conversation following his angry outburst during a student workshop on entrepreneurship.

Luis is a Latinx student with curly hair that often hangs over his eyes. He starts every day by greeting every student and adult at school with a handshake and a warm smile. He is affectionately known as “The Mayor.” Luis is a bilingual student who has already tested out of needing additional

world language credits.¹ Despite an innate charisma and linguistic intelligence, he struggles with confidence. His defense mechanism is to shut down or turn hostile when he feels that his intelligence is questioned. During the lesson on entrepreneurship, Luis felt that he was corrected publicly and his embarrassment turned to anger. He stormed out of the workshop which led to him and I walking the school grounds while he took some time to cool down. Our conversation circled around what had triggered his anger and how he could respond in a more productive way in the future. It was neither the first nor the last conversation that we would have like this.

Later in the year, I would connect Luis with an internship at a local non-profit focused on providing affordable home ownership opportunities to local area residents. At his first trimester exhibition, he discussed the importance of affordable housing for members of his immigrant, Spanish-speaking community. He met the mayor of his town at a press conference and ribbon-cutting ceremony for a new construction project that his internship site had completed. However, his initial enthusiasm waned as the daily tasks of his internship turned monotonous. His mentor complained about his lack of professionalism and communication skills. Despite several meetings with Luis and his mentor to discuss ways in which he could be more engaged with his internship, we eventually decided that this was not the right opportunity for him. Luis no longer felt interested in real estate or affordable housing.

After a disappointing end to this first internship, Luis and I discussed other interest areas that he might pursue. He decided on basketball and began to research the requirements for athletic training and coaching. While we met frequently to discuss his research and corresponding project—a workshop in which he would teach basic basketball drills and skills to a group of inexperienced players—he struggled to take independent steps toward completion of either his research or his project. Independent work is a core feature of learning at The Met. Students are expected to have the motivation and skills necessary to follow through on independent projects that are connected to deep learning. Luis's lack of confidence and poor literacy skills proved to be barriers that impeded his ability to send

¹ In the United States, secondary students are expected to study a World Language besides English for a minimum of two years in order to graduate. Most colleges also set this two-year minimum as a prerequisite for admission. Multilingual students can access testing to prove linguistic proficiency and be exempt from taking additional world language classes.

out a student survey recruiting participants for his workshop or make calls to set up interviews where he could learn more about the coaching field. He also struggled to read articles that would have provided the academic component of his project work. At Luis's final exhibition, he admitted that he had not completed the planning for his basketball workshop. The educational structures intended to be democratic did not support this learner. What he most needed to be successful were foundational literacy skills. His democratic education assumed that he would gain these skills through his independent research and insisted that he should have voice and choice in choosing his learning path. However, he first needed to be equipped with the building blocks that would have empowered him to most proficiently exercise that voice and choice.

Democratic education is a messy endeavor. I believe in the ideals set forth by a school that desires each student to narrate their own educational journey, but I feel inadequate to provide Luis with the necessary tools for writing and implementing this narrative. This is where collaborating with an experienced set of team members can begin to make a difference. As I started preparing for tenth grade with my advisory, I learned that a pair of advisors with English Language Arts training were collaborating on a literacy curriculum. They graciously allowed me to join them, and with their support I am gaining valuable skills to help support my students' growth in literacy skill development. This peer collaboration is a fundamental feature of how great work happens at The Met. However, it is important to note that these connections and collaborations happen on a grassroots level. My colleagues are so committed to the work, not just their own students but mine as well, that they share their knowledge with a selfless generosity that has humbled me as it has surprised me. I mentioned earlier that there is no system of training in the United States by which a secondary teacher becomes a generalist. Veteran advisors know the challenges that their "rookie" peers will face, and without being asked, they step forward again and again to provide direct and indirect support. This unplanned peer mentoring is part of the magic of this place. Without it this messy educational context would likely disintegrate into splinters of teacher burnout.

Could this context be less messy? Perhaps, but it would require a radical reorientation of educational structures, starting with teacher preparation. If I could go back in time to my pre-service training, I would push to learn how to set classroom structures in place that remove the teacher from the front of the room and place them beside the student. I would ask that

every teacher understands the fundamentals of literacy and how to communicate what it means to be literate when reading various kinds of texts. (For instance, how is reading a peer reviewed journal article different from reading a fiction piece and drawing out themes?) Democratic education must begin at the teacher training level so that it can be implemented in our democratic schools. At the very least, democratic schools must conduct rigorous onboarding for new hires so that they understand how to hold in tension the value of a student's voice with the empowering ability to teach what it means to learn how to learn. To anyone thinking of starting or currently running a democratic school, I encourage you to find those with experience who share your vision for learning. Empower and equip them to mentor the new hires in your school. Make time for them to do that work and trust that they will do it well. My previous years of teaching in traditional contexts have taught me the importance of maintaining control in my classroom and of making sure that my students are meeting some abstract set of educational standards. Luis and I are both wrestling to undo years of training, and this struggle toward democratic education will be a slow uphill battle.

* * *

I am now in my second year at the Met. Luis is a tenth grader, and I do see this messy process resulting in change and growth in his life. Over the summer, Luis contacted me about a summer internship opportunity that he had started. He was dismayed that the internship training program would pay him, but only after he did the work of seeking his own placement. He told me that he planned to leave the intern program and would not be doing anything over the summer. I encouraged him not to give up, but my prior year's experience with Luis did not lead me to believe that he would take initiative to seek out his own internship. I did not hear from Luis again until the first day of school when he proudly announced that he had spent almost all the money that he made at his summer internship. I was amazed at what he accomplished and continued to observe his newfound initiative and self-confidence in action. At the end of September, he volunteered at a large community event. This service experience required him to interact with strangers in a crowded public venue. Before the event, he had to attend a virtual training. More recently, Luis texted to let me know that he had contacted a potential internship site for this year. He made the phone call on his own time outside of school. And to bring this

story full circle, the same entrepreneurship program that he stormed out of last year is a place where he is pushing himself to create and present a business plan this year. These are things that Luis would have shied away from in the past. He would have told me that he didn't like people. He might have shut down or simply avoided the experiences that are now giving him the opportunity to see himself as an entrepreneur.

VIGNETTE 2

My first impressions of Annette, Jorge and Camila came through a partnership that I set up with a local dance company. Annette has extensive dance training. Camila took dance classes when she was younger. Jorge has no formal training but simply loves to move. Movement is a missing element of learning, even in many progressive educational contexts. We are expected to learn with our minds and leave our bodies behind. So I was excited for the opportunity to take a small group of students outside of our school building and invite them into a movement context as a way for them to connect to the community and tie their career interests into kinesthetic work. Their partnership lasted for the duration of the dance company rehearsing and producing a spring dance concert. In total the students interned with the company one day per week for eight weeks.

Aleya (choreographer, company founder and student mentor) was deeply concerned that the students' voices be heard throughout the creation process. What were their personal interests? Their career goals? How could we tie these into the choreographic and production process? We shared these questions with the students, and the result was that Annette, guided by an interest in performance, became a rehearsal director. Camila, guided by an interest in construction, worked on creating props for the set. Jorge, guided by an interest in animation, worked on creating sketches during company rehearsals. The goal of these independent projects was to enable the students to see how their individual interests could intersect with the field of performing arts.

In addition to independent projects, the three students also participated in weekly movement warm-ups. Leading up to the final performance, the three interns were invited to create a moving "self-portrait" to perform alongside the professional dancers. The concert was a series of self-portraits inspired by each of the dancers sharing a peek into their inner thought lives through movement. Initially, the students were excited about the prospect of choreographing and performing together. Aleya

spent time working with them on phrases of movement and assured them that there was no expectation that this movement be a technical series of highly rehearsed steps. However, the students grew more nervous and felt more inhibited as the date of the concert approached. In the end, they decided that the role they felt most comfortable in was a speaking role in which they would introduce the dance company and the inspiration for the piece before each performance. Because their school constantly pushes them into public speaking experiences, all three students felt confident about introducing the dance company. They spoke with confidence and charisma. They owned the stage in that spoken introduction. However, they did not feel a similar confidence to move their bodies in front of this audience. Why not and what, if anything, does this have to do with democratic education?

CONCLUSION

Annette, Jorge, Camila and Luis all represent different facets of what it means to provide democratic education in a context that is trying to offer an equitable education to students coming from a wide variety of backgrounds across the state of Rhode Island. In Luis's case, he had the opportunity to drive his own education. His personal interests were the catalyst for his academic study and ensuing project work. I was personally able to witness his growth in confidence and leadership over the course of his ninth grade year. I could depend on him to ask thoughtful questions during his peers' project consultancies. However, a big requirement of each year's work is that student, with the support of their mentor and advisor, create academically rich projects that enhance their internship work and push them toward deeper understanding of their chosen field of study. Technically, Luis did not meet these requirements. In a similar way, working alongside Aleya, the dance company interns were able to bring their personal passions to bear in the context of creating a dance concert that was performed on a public stage. Their personal passions had real world impacts. Camila was able to watch as company members carried the stool that she had created onstage. In spite of these accomplishments, all three dance interns started their experience with the hope that they would have the chance to perform. Yet presented with that opportunity, they expressed fear and ultimately opted to shy away.

Both of the vignettes described above represent the beautiful messiness of democratic education in my context along with its potential

shortcomings. Because my most profound learning moments have happened in the context of dance studios and onstage, I hope to use a performing arts analogy to expound on these shortfalls. In the context of dance as a performance art, when a piece of choreography is truly collaborative, the performers must be invited into the creative process with the choreographer. In order to do this, both performers and choreographer must have a common language of movement. Even in movement that does not have a codified vocabulary, there is a shared understanding of the body's connectedness. Dancers have to be able to identify from where a particular movement is initiated. In order to do that they must have an innate sense of how to engage various muscle groups in order to control their skeletal frame. If the community of performers shares this fundamental and technical knowledge, they can enter together into a creative process in which each member's voice is valued and there is "faith in the ... collective capacity to create possibilities for resolving problems" (Apple and Bean, 1995). In this case, the problem to be solved is how to create a piece that connects with an audience and is executed with skill. Once this collective capacity is established, the dancers will labor for hours over how phrases of movement transition from one to the next. But the core principle is that all of this collaboration will happen in the context of common building blocks of body and movement awareness.

If Jorge, Annette and Camila had been given access to deeper and more direct instruction on the technical skills required to create a piece of choreography, they may have gained even a small foundation of building blocks from which to piece together some authentic movement that they could have felt confident performing. If they had even been given some explicit movements to use in their creative process, they may have found in their trio a collective capacity to overcome the inhibitions they felt about creating a dance to perform in front of a group of strangers. They needed time and deeper coaching. While they were valued members of a community and while they had full access and even an invitation to perform, they lacked the technical skills and core body knowledge that would have best empowered them to contribute their movement "voices" to choreographing for themselves.

This same principle of time and coaching applies to Luis. If he had received a deeper grounding in understanding the vocabulary surrounding affordable housing, he might have been able to contribute his voice to a larger conversation about this issue. If he had the literacy instruction that prepared him to conduct independent research into an issue that affects

him and his family, perhaps he would have been able to engage with his internship site and stay motivated to complete the school year. He may have even been offered a summer job working at the front desk at his site. To apply the performance analogy here, Luis understood the problem of facing his community as an insider affected by the lack of affordable housing. He was invited to collaborate on solving this problem; however, he did not have faith in his own capacity to create possibilities. While he has grown in confidence, it is important now to put in place the technical building blocks of literacy that will increase his independent learning and creative capacities. In doing so, he will be able to more confidently step into more challenging real world learning experiences that will then enable him to come back to the classroom with harder thinking questions that will challenge his literacy and communication skills to grow even more. The best work is when the internship pushes the students in the classroom, while the classroom pushes the students to excel at an internship so that they are granted more responsibility and access to deeper real world work.

As I embark on my second year of teaching in a progressive school, I see both the incredible potential alongside the potential shortcomings that have been noted. I wonder how to leverage a school that is participating in the democratic schooling movement, so that it might further empower the voices of the students that it serves. The Met is no longer a small school of 50 students, and so the work of tailoring education to “one student at a time” is more challenging than ever. Is it still even possible? The Met seeks to “de-emphasize power [by moving] toward indirect communication” (Delpit, 1988). Lisa Delpit might argue that this very de-emphasis on direct instruction has the adverse impact of keeping students in a state of subjugation. Just as the dancer in me craves technical knowledge, so that I am legitimized within my community of artists, I recognize that direct communication and instruction of technical skills will be necessary to achieve a fully democratic education. Direct instruction alone will prevent my students from engaging with professionals in the real world. Engagement in the real world alone will prevent these same students from gaining the technical skills required to be legitimized in that real world. Either choice is insufficient in itself, yet both require exorbitant amounts of time. So there is a tension in that time is limited when we prioritize releasing students into the real world for multiple days out of each week, and yet must be patient with these students as they painstakingly build a strong foundation of technical knowledge. I am still early in this journey.



Mission Hill School: Fostering Creative Storytelling Through Democratic Learning

Carolyn Shadid Lewis, Selma Lewis, and Deborah Meier

Democracy was, from childhood on, my passion and the purpose of the world my parents lived in. It was contagious, but also as complex an idea and as hard to fully achieve as getting to the moon was.

I retired from New York City public schools when I was sixty-five. I went to work with my ally and mentor Ted Sizer.¹ We wrote; we went on speaking tours; I helped in the founding of the Annenberg Center in Providence. But having spent the past thirty-five years inside urban public schools and classrooms, I found it hard to be looking in and advising rather than doing it. I missed the Central Park East schools. On the way up to Boston one day to see my teacher friends, Brenda Engel and Eleanor Duckworth, I thought maybe the three of us could dream up a new school in Boston. They loved the idea, and Boston had just initiated a perfect

¹Sizer wrote the Horace trilogies: *Hoarce's Compromise*, *Horace's School*, and *Horace's Hope*. He was also the co-founder with me of the Coalition of Essential schools (<http://essentialschools.org/>).

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match—pilot schools with almost full autonomy, funded on the same basis as its regular public schools.²

Another Boston friend and I drafted the required information about the kindergarten through grade eight school (K-Eight) we wanted to create. Mission Hill was founded and opened the next fall, 1997.

We founded the school on the five democratic principles of “Habits of Mind”³ (optimism, flexibility, resilience, persistence, and empathy). We wanted democratic decision-making to be possible at the school and classroom level, where leaders, teachers, staff, families, and students all had a voice at the table.

The idea was a school in which ultimate authority rested in the hands of a Board of equal numbers (five) of parents and teachers and also five community members that we—parents and teachers—chose. (Later we added five students.) This was new to me. My previous schools were more properly called “teacher-run” and did not have such community involvement.

There are many ways to try to make sure that each “citizen” has an equal voice and access to resources and that power rests on their knowledgeable and free consent. Mission Hill aspired to be such a community.

We hired very experienced teachers who wanted the kind of collegiality we proposed in designing the school and the time needed to run the school collectively. The teachers came with their own belief in democracy. We believed that our students could best learn about democracy by witnessing us trying to do it and over time practicing it with us.

This democratic approach also meant a certain kind of pedagogy and curriculum. We designed a curriculum theme for fall, winter, and spring that would be carried out from the kindergarten-first grade team all the way through to the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade classes. The curriculum left room, we hoped, for creativity, in adapting to each teacher’s own class.

We treated the teachers’ ideas seriously, believing this would transfer to them taking their students’ ideas seriously too. We wanted teachers to give their students choices when possible and time to “play,” not just in

²<https://www.cce.org/thought-leadership/publications/category/pilot-schools>.

³Dewey used the phrase “Habits of Mind,” but he doesn’t really ever describe in detail. We saw Habits of Mind guiding principles for all students in all subjects. They should be short and few. I saw them as habits of democracy and a way of describing what “using one’s mind well” meant. Ted Sizer and the Coalition of Essential Schools had coined that phrase.

kindergarten. Playing with blocks, designing bridges, and creating useful graphs are all exercises in “playing with ideas”—and modes of work we all respected and practiced. They were all part of our shared vision as we excitedly waited for our first six classes to arrive.

Yes, this vision of democracy was not, at first, easy to do! While teachers would have a lot of autonomy, we wanted a voice in holding each other accountable—that’s where the Governing Board, frequent individual class, and whole-school gatherings would help us all. This also meant “too many” meetings—a basic democracy problem! Yet it turned out that meetings where you have an actual voice do not feel as long as meetings where someone talks at you.

For twenty-five years that lasted beyond my tenure at the school, Mission Hill School (MHS) lived out, as best it could, a vision of democracy. As you will see from Carolyn and Selma’s experience, many students greatly benefited from this approach. The “habits” of heart and mind that make democracy work is the vision we all hold. But habits take time and practice if they are to survive the inevitable crises that all of us face.

A MOTHER AND DAUGHTER’S REFLECTION OF MISSION HILL SCHOOL

“What do you remember most about Mission Hill School,” I asked eight-year-old Selma.

“I remember my friends and my teachers,” she replied. “I remember the time we had to play and to work on our own projects. We don’t have that time now. I miss it.”

Selma started Kindergarten at Mission Hill School in 2018. We wanted a school that centered equity and integration at its core with a sense of the greater good. Additionally, we wanted a school that focused on “the whole child,” that saw children as creators, and that did not reduce them to a test score. Selma was reading chapter books at age four. As a child-centered rather than test-centered school, MHS honed Selma’s gifts and the gifts of her fellow students.

Boston Public Schools (BPS) closed Mission Hill School in 2022 due to lawsuits surrounding bullying among the students. The school was not perfect—like all schools, it needed to improve in many areas, including its literacy instruction, its consistency across classrooms, its student safety, the social/emotional learning of its students, and the integration of its diverse

community. Yet BPS was wrong to close MHS. The school provided the most culturally rich, academically engaging curriculum in the district. The closure of the school is a significant loss to the city and to the field of education.

The following provides a glimpse into our experience at Mission Hill School and Selma's academic evolution from kindergarten to second grade. MHS sparked Selma's creativity, imagination, and independent thinking. The school nurtured her abilities as a writer.

OUR EXPERIENCE IN K1/K2 (FIRST AND SECOND YEARS OF KINDERGARTEN)

"Do you remember Kathy and Liana?" I asked Selma.

"Oh yes! They were so nice. I remember them reading us books at nap time," she replied.

Kathy Clunis D'Andrea and Liana Cosgrove were two part-time teachers who shared their time in Selma's K1/K2 class, accompanied by a full-time paraprofessional named June.

Kathy and Liana both expertly handled a small mixed-aged, experiential classroom. Their love of teaching was infectious. They beautifully managed students with a wide range of abilities in the same class—from K1 students on Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) to extremely advanced K2 students. They carefully observed each child, taking the time to discover their strengths and specific needs. They discussed their discoveries of each child with families, celebrating the child's gifts while also providing a plan and empathetic support for areas that needed improvement. Here is a description of their learning from a 2018 school-wide newsletter:

Room 106

Kathy, Liana & June

*For the past two weeks, we've been diving deep into the skill of using words to describe attributes. We read the book *Quick as a Cricket*, which uses attribute words to describe animals (happy as a lark; gentle as a lamb).*

Over the course of these discussions, we've noticed that attribute words are connected to every subject. In math we've sorted buttons by shape, color, size and number of holes. We've noticed how the attributes of our monarch larvae have changed during their metamorphosis. We've discussed the attributes of our bodies and hair as we've created self-portraits in the classroom and in the art room.

We've noticed how authors use text of various shapes and sizes to create emphasis in storytelling.

We used the new attribute words we've been learning to describe something that we could feel in a bag, but couldn't see (a decorative gourd). Mira said, "It feels hard." Emerson said, "It felt smooth." Walter said, "It felt bumpy in some places."

These conversations about descriptive attributes will lay the groundwork for our discussions

next week about our new theme: bubbles and foam.

—Liana, Kathy & June

The teachers' report shows how the areas of literacy, math, art, science, and storytelling all intersect with their investigations of attribute words. The children learned to sound out, to spell, and to write a variety of attribute words. They also learned about their tactile meaning by counting and sorting buttons, by drawing their self-portraits, by observing monarch larvae change during metamorphosis, and by using words to describe a purely tactile sensory experience.

Selma loved going to her class—she was upset if she had to miss a day of school. I also enjoyed volunteering in her K1/K2 class and learned so much from observing Liana and Kathy's model of teaching. Their engaging lessons encouraged inquiry and child participation.

The mixed-aged classroom benefited Selma; she developed relationships with students from across the community. She also developed strong bonds with her teachers who she had for two years. Selma thrived with this Montessori-inspired model—she helped the younger students with reading and the older students helped her with math and science. As an only child, she had a taste of what it is like to have siblings.

THE THEMED CURRICULUM

In the first trimester of 2018, the students dove into the theme of Chemistry. They called themselves "cooking chemists" as they learned their fractions by baking. They discovered that a liquid turned into a solid by making whipped cream.

In the second trimester, they studied ancient Egypt. Through frequent trips to the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Boston, the students learned hieroglyphics in addition to their letters.

"Did you enjoy going to the MFA," I asked Selma.

“Yes! I remember peeking through a crack in a sarcophagus to try and see the mummy inside.”

For the last trimester of 2018/2019, Selma learned more about the Southern Freedom Movement than I learned in all my schooling combined.

“What did you learn when you studied the Civil Rights Movement?” I asked.

“I studied Claudette Colvin,” Selma began. “I learned that adults weren’t the only ones who fought for Civil Rights—they were just the only ones who got noticed.”

“Who else fought for Civil Rights?”

“Kids. Martin Luther King said that the best way to fight was to fill up the jails, but the adults didn’t want to, so the kids did.”

“Should we listen to what kids have to say?”

“Yeah. Kids notice things more than adults do normally, because their brains aren’t so used to the world like adults are. Adults have been used to the world for 20 odd years, so they don’t notice things like kids do.”

COVID-19’S EFFECT ON THE SCHOOL

In 2019, Selma’s K2 year was also off to a good start. They spent time outside studying rocks and compost in their first trimester focusing on earth science. In their second trimester, the class spent hours at the Ancient China wing of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. They learned about the culture, belief system, and imperialism of the ancient world through Chinese stories and paintings.

In 2020, the pandemic changed everything. In addition to the many losses that came with the pandemic, COVID-19 also brought the loss of Mission Hill School’s themed curriculum as BPS gave the school a “transformation status.”

OUR EXPERIENCE IN THE FIRST GRADE CLASSROOM

Allison Freedman was Selma’s first/second grade teacher. Though new to the school, Allison came with an enthusiasm for project-based learning and a focus on literacy. We went to a hybrid in-person/online format in the spring of Selma’s first grade year. We no longer had our original curriculum, but the BPS “Focus on Early Learning” curriculum was thematic. It allowed for “studios” where students could opt into projects that related to the topics that they were learning. Ironically, MHS’ themed

curriculum influenced the BPS curriculum. Additionally, one of the architects of the “Focus” curriculum was a former MHS teacher.

Though the “Focus” curriculum allowed for projects, Allison said that she learned from her Mission Hill team how to create open-ended projects that truly spark students’ enthusiasm for the subject. She learned how to follow the child’s lead and to use the support of the community. For instance, in a unit called “Resources in our Communities,” Allison decided to add a real-world element to the curriculum by having the class interview local business owners via Zoom. The studio’s project for that theme was to “create their own market.” Though not part of the curriculum, Selma and her second grade classmate decided to create their own bookstore. They wanted to make the books by hand and to bind them. Allison did not direct the project—she followed Selma and her friend’s lead, providing them with the necessary materials. Once all the books were complete, we hosted a sidewalk sale on a weekend.

“We made a bookstore!” Selma said. “And we made all the books...We made \$104. We each got \$34, and we gave \$35 to Mission Hill.”

Allison saw them using their literacy skills from their phonics curriculum in a meaningful way in the creation of their books. When they actually sold the books, they used significant math skills as they determined the price of each book and collected money from their neighbors and friends.

“You created your own business, right?” I asked Selma.

“Yeah—and I think that is what inspired me and Melina to write our own book.”

OUR EXPERIENCE IN THE SECOND GRADE CLASSROOM

At the beginning of the 2021 school year, the district mishandled the lawsuits against MHS and threw our school into unnecessary chaos and turmoil. Yet despite the disruption to the school, Allison somehow created an engaging and steady classroom. When learning about equitable public space, the class made models of accessible playgrounds for children with disabilities. They frequented an Arboretum close by to observe erosion and to study pollinators in action. For a final project, I collaborated with Allison to help them animate their reports on the pollinators that they studied. Every first and second grade student (except for one first grader on an IEP) could read the reports they wrote, as evidenced here: <https://vimeo.com/720488724>

Allison got fifteen of the sixteen students in her class up to a good reading level. She observed each child and honed their interests and skills. She allowed for challenging, independent work for the advanced students that enabled her to work individually with students who needed more help.

I asked Allison how she balanced project-based learning with skills fluency in her class, and she said the following:

“Reflecting on my time at Mission Hill, the projects that were the most important to the kids were the ones that they led and that I guided...Any ‘direct instruction’ skills students learned (like phonics, math computation, etc....) would have a natural use within a deeper, long-term project that would be realized and applied by the students themselves.”

CREATING SPACE FOR SELMA’S GIFT OF WRITING

“What inspired *The Night of the Shee*?” I asked Selma referring to the 50-page book she wrote in second grade with her friend, Melina

“The ‘Community and Culture’ unit in school,” Selma replied. “So, Melina has a French background, and I have an Irish one. And it’s a story about a girl who moved from France to Ireland during the Second World War.”

Here is an excerpt:

From France to Ireland

“And why are we moving again, maman?” here

“We have discussed this. We can no longer stay. The war is too dangerous! Your grand-pere was killed! It has been going on too long! We must leave.”

“But, maman-”

“Do not argue! Now go pack!”

“But-”

“You heard me, young lady! Now go pack!”

Jane O’Sullivan sighed, then stomped up the stairs. She had never agreed to this. Moving to Ireland would never be her first choice. She had always called France her home.

Jane sighed again as she stuffed her best shawl into her suitcase. She didn’t know anything about Ireland and didn’t care to learn more. Running away was babyish, she knew that...or maybe, just maybe...it wasn’t.

The story continues to unfold as Jane eventually moves to Ireland. She discovers her royal Irish roots and her family’s relationship with the fairy

folk. Here is another excerpt as she and her friend, Ava, stumble upon an enchanted library in the castle where she now lives:

There was a gaping hole in the wall where, just a minute ago, a quarter of a bookshelf had been.

“Wow,” Ava whispered.

“Where does it lead?” Jane asked.

“How am I supposed to know? C’mon. Let’s follow it!”

And Ava bravely stepped forward, into the dark tunnel—and vanished.

Jane gasped. She looked around, summoned her courage—and stepped after Ava. It was like walking through a sheet of cool water. Jane shivered; this was obviously magical.

And, quite suddenly, it was over.

Jane was in a long, dark tunnel. A faint light was emanating from the end of the hallway. Her courage seemed to leak from her body with every step she took toward that glowing passage—

Selma and Melina explored their own and each other’s cultural identities, using their gifts of storytelling to create a stunning example of the writing and imagination of two second graders.

THE CLOSURE OF MISSION HILL SCHOOL

Mission Hill School dramatically and publicly closed. Press surrounded our school, traumatizing the children. The press illegally used our children’s images to sell a sensational story of the misdeeds of an academically failing school. The district falsely accused our children and teachers of poor performance in order to cover their own tracks.

Amidst this turmoil, Allison gave Selma and Melina hard copy versions of their book. More than that, Allison, Kathy, Liana, and many other teachers gave their students the gift of curiosity, the gift of inquiry, and the knowledge that their insights and abilities matter.

THE TEST-FOCUSED DISTRICT

We understand that BPS has an arduous task to equitably educate every child in a diverse city that is essentially still segregated. Yet, the district’s handling of MHS was unjust. We feel a deep loss of the Mission Hill community and the beautiful form of education that it provided. One of my

biggest concerns is that BPS' priority on tests over other important academic markers is not helping our children.

Instead of writing her next novel, Selma must spend hours on a computer phonics program that is significantly below her reading level. In third grade, the district does not allow students to write their own material. To prepare for the MCAS⁴ tests, their writing must be in response to pre-existing written material. In other words, their writing must paraphrase others' ideas instead of expressing their own. This is a necessary skill, but as the only focus of third grade writing, it fails to adequately develop literacy and imaginative problem-solving skills.

After my daughter's engrossing curriculum at Mission Hill School, where science was a hands-on experience rather than a theoretical one, I am sad to see the district's reliance on videos, worksheets, and computers for their teaching methods. Science no longer excites Selma as it once did. Additionally, children spend a significant portion of their days on computers, despite the research confirming its damaging effects on their brain development, eye health, hormonal balance, and overall well-being (Madigan, 2019).

We understand that schools are in a difficult position as they deal with larger class sizes from teacher shortages and significant learning loss from the pandemic. Teachers face unbelievable challenges in the classroom as the wider culture fails to support (and often undermines) the social and emotional wellness of kids. Yet we should not use computers to automate instruction and to provide a classroom management strategy.

Mission Hill School was not a perfect institution, but it focused on a much wider range of child learning with great results for many of its students. It was also the only public elementary school in the district where children could creatively use their gifts independently of a test score.

AN IMAGINED SCHOOL

"If you could create your own school, what would it be?" I asked Selma.

"A magic school. Instead of English, you would learn to dive into books and become one with the character."

"Oooh. And what would your perfect school here on earth look like?"

⁴Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System; [https://www.mass.gov/parents-guide-to-the-mcas#:~:text=Massachusetts%20Comprehensive%20Assessment%20System%20\(MCAS,and%20where%20they%20need%20help.](https://www.mass.gov/parents-guide-to-the-mcas#:~:text=Massachusetts%20Comprehensive%20Assessment%20System%20(MCAS,and%20where%20they%20need%20help.)

“It would be focused on kids being able to tell their own stories,” she replied.

Mission Hill School gave Selma a sense of belonging, connected her to nature, antiquity, and social justice movements, and helped her to discover her gift and voice as a writer. We cannot bring the school back or change the mistakes of the past, but together we can change education for all students in the present, so that, for future generations, their educational experiences will be a past worth having.

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Building Student Agency One Book at a Time

Deborah Lang Froggatt

The books are on the new shelves, the notable guests are seated, and the ribbon is set to be cut. Then, in a flourish of awe, students fill in to enjoy celebrating the new library in their school.

TheodoreSizer states that “literacy is the fuel for freedom ... a right” (Plaut, 2009, p. x). The lack of access to a library denies children the liberty to further their education as independent life-long learners, a foundational principle of a democratic society (AASL, 2007; Jaeger & Burnett, 2010). Think of the stories about the human condition that embrace us when we are in a library. Authentic student agency is fostered when the power of story is woven across a school community.

As a veteran school library teacher and a district-wide library services director for Boston Public Schools (BPS), I believe that, and there is research to support this tenet: students with equitable access to effective

Boston Public Schools, an American urban school district, is striving to ensure equitable access to effective school library programs for all students.

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school library programming (ESLP) garner a sense of wonder and the love of reading. The collaborative, information literacy skills that they acquire intertwine with the Democratic Schools' defining concepts. I deem students the *informationally underserved* (IU) (Froggatt, 2015) when they learn without access to a dedicated library teacher who facilitates inquiry-based learning, showcases rich resources of fiction and nonfiction physical and digital texts, and collaborates fully with the school community. The students that I studied were urban young adults, many from families in poverty. However, the IU can be of any age and can live in rural and suburban settings. Unless the IU can access a public library, many possess little cognizance of their *information worlds* (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010), the source of the online content and who controls this access. For many schools without librarians or libraries, both near and far, I hope that the scenarios offered here bring elements of democratic schools to light. The use of story, the library pedagogical, and the management descriptions outlined below, all underscored with theoretical foundations, can be incorporated into a school community's teaching and learning practices.

Libraries are an element of the public sphere and provide an open arena for authentic, student-driven learning that empowers an exchange of intellectual content that is "essential to the functioning of a democracy" (Jaeger & Burnett, 2011, p. 165). School libraries weave together voices and perspectives in order for students to become informationally literate and participate in information exchanges and public discourse. These are significant elements of a democratic society. For a student, free and open library collections, book discussions, inquiry-based learning, and authentic research where students answer their own questions mirror a community's communication network that includes "the public press, forums, schools libraries, and other settings" (Jaeger & Burnett, 2011, p. 165).

School library book collections are a tangible representation of knowledge and provide a visual outflow of ideas through the curation of culturally relevant literature and texts in all formats. Information is "intangible" (Buckland, 1991, p. 352). IU students are in the conundrum of not having enough background information to create new knowledge. Guidance and serendipity are ways to acquire information for learning. Curated digital or physical library collections are tangible representations of knowledge where students can access and explore what they need for the question or curiosity at hand. The following student learning scenarios from my career as a school library teacher and a school district director highlight how an ESLP fosters a democratic school environment.

One student, a 14-year-old Boston Arts Academy (BAA), reluctantly entered the library and barked that he “hated to read.” Rising up to the challenge, I asked Rashaun about his interests. Impudently, he said, “Hip hop!” BAA, Boston’s only performing and visual arts high school, offers students a strong collection in the arts. As we walked along in that section of the library, I pointed out architecture, visual arts, theater, dance, and then music books that moved from classical to rock to jazz to hip-hop books. Rashaun’s eyes grew wide and he paused and said with respectful awe, “I never knew there were books like this.” Another student, Rafael, has a passion for soccer and he found his library niche in sports biographies. For these young adults and countless others, library access opens up new worlds and to the “windows and mirrors” of their lives (Sims, 2015). A curated library collection can open new worlds and reflects one’s own world. These *IU* students became regular library users who leveraged the social capital, background knowledge, and information access skills that a library offers (Bundy, 2008) to develop their agency to satisfy personal curiosities and academic responsibilities.

The BAA community used summer reading as a way for teachers to get to know students who were not in their classes or homerooms. An alternative to assigning one book per grade level or one book that the whole school community reads, students had ten choices from which to choose ranging from fiction to graphic novels to nonfiction to poetry. Upon returning to school, students were grouped by the book they chose rather than by grade or art major. Some students stepped up to co-facilitate the discussions. The administrators created a schedule where, for an hour every person in the school, from the nurse to the head of school, was engaged in authentic discourse. As the library teacher, I coordinated with a team to make the book selections and supported creating an adaptable discussion protocol that could be used with any book. We were able to receive funds in order for every student to receive their own book. Krashen (n.d.) suggests that in order to “defend children against the effects of poverty ... providing improved school and classroom libraries ... can even mitigate the effects of poverty on school achievement and literacy development” (p. 2). On the day that we passed out the summer reading books, there was a palpable, electric energy throughout the school.

Until poverty is drastically reduced or eliminated, schools need to defend children against its effect on student growth. This means providing nutrition, health care, a clean environment, and books. In terms of policy, this means continued and expanded support for free/reduced meal

programs, increased school nursing care, and, of course, improved school and classroom libraries.

Books, reading, and sharing literature are primary avenues for how school library teachers know well most students, the faculty, the curriculum, and the community. Looking back, no matter the library where I have served, the sharing of personal stories through books prompts the development of close relationships. I tend to know my library patrons much better than they know me. Trust is nurtured by the embrace of a rich, culturally responsive library collection of books and the stories therein. Library programs foster a culture of reading and open ears and hearts to bring a shared community. This open, intimate information exchange can reach every corner of the school and fosters genuine care for others.

In the mid-1990s, close to the onset of the ubiquitous nature of educational technology, I was the library teacher at East Ridge Middle School in Ridgefield, Connecticut, a school of over 1300 sixth to eighth graders. “I only use books! I don’t need to bring my students to the library.” This was my greeting from a seasoned teacher, Mr. Roberts, part of a four-person eight-grade history team. As I began to work with grade level and content areas, and extended the hand of collegiality, in time, he became the library’s biggest proponent. Mr. Roberts and I first began collaborating by developing library book reserve carts for his classroom. We talked about our shared belief that disciplinary literacy is significant, and we bonded over the books his students were using.

At this time, we were new to many of the nascent models of information literacy: “where resource-based learning, constructivism, and the development of thinking skills ... and practice come together” (Farmer & Henri, 2008). Through discourse with Mr. Robert’s history team, we offered biography as a genre for students to acquire information literacy skills and dig into the content from American history regarding time periods, places, and events of importance. We partnered with the grade eight English teachers as well and developed inquiry-based, interdisciplinary biographical research lessons. Students were challenged to choose a person from history and answer, “Who is this person and why should I care?” (Froggatt & Gately, 1999). This was a common touchstone for all 350 students. They all did independent research, wrote an opinion paper, and gave an oral presentation using PowerPoint, which at the time was cutting-edge software.

Despite a complicated schedule, each quarter, 80 students used the library to research sports figures, artists, gangsters, activists, and other famous and infamous folks from American history. Guided by the teachers and me, students engaged in reading nonfiction texts from quality digital and print texts that included information analysis of periodicals and websites. They applied information literacy skills to analyze sources as well as critical thinking to investigate the person's historical context. We trusted the students to do the work and the team trusted me to integrate information literacy with the classroom content including disciplinary reading, opinion writing, citation creation, and plagiarism.

Moving forward ten years, I applied the Guided Inquiry Design model (GID) (Kuhlthau et al., 2015) to create a collaborative research unit. GID begins with an "open-ended concept" (p. 175), in this case, the Harlem Renaissance. This two-word phrase was framed and introduced in class. Boston Arts Academy ninth-grade Humanities students were charged with "identify(ing)" (pp. 56–57) an artist from that era who applied their art to further a social justice cause, generating questions as to why and how. GID begins with a critical "explore" phase (p. 56). We relished the time given to students to bring their background knowledge of the Harlem Renaissance in order to dig through digital and print texts for ideas; in the end, the authentic and creative ways to "share" (p. 58) their new understandings were powerful. Students used the library to "gather" (p. 57) and analyze relevant resources to "create" a position paper and a presentation (p. 57). Then they applied critical thinking and deep reading from a variety of source types—biographies, journal articles, editorials, webpages—to "craft connections between new information and existing knowledge" (Gordon, 2009, p. 21).

The authentic presentations using an art form to express how their artists' gifts provided 85 examples of how artists can solve challenges in their communities. Imagine Kayla dancing to the jazz standard, "Strange Fruit," as she depicted Billy Holiday's tragic life and the song's centrality to the early civil rights movement (Pak, 2019). School library teachers are tasked with leading inquiry learning that embeds information literacy. Biography, memoir, and fiction are remarkable genres to be leveraged for discourse, building trust, and social change.

We end where we began with the *informationally underserved* (Froggatt, 2015). The story of the IU's educational context puts forward this conundrum: One needs knowledge about a given subject in order to locate and create new knowledge about it. IU suffer from this information paradox

(Shenton, 2007) and have a right to “the information-transformational challenge of learning” (Todd & Kuhlthau, 2005, p. 86) that effective school library programs provide. Be reminded that the act of distributing information is itself a political act” (Rioux, 2010, p. 13). To that end, consider partnering with a librarian and a library in order to ensure that your student’s stories are heard and that they have the opportunity to learn from other’s stories. Students can then co-construct inquiry learning that includes critical reflection in order to discern their information needs, the information world in which they live, and “aspects of experience and the different perspectives that they involve achieves a ‘decentered’ understanding of the lifeworld” (Benoit, 2002, p. 458).

Lievrouw and Farb claim that “it is equally clear that if people lack the skills and background to understand or use the information resources that are available ... Research and policy must assess people’s abilities to use the resources they have, and provide a wider range of learning opportunities for those who wish to take advantage of them” (2003 p. 528). We must remind ourselves that the provision of information services is an inherently powerful activity. Access, control, and mediation of information contain inherent power relationships.

CONCLUSION

Offering all students avenues to grow their information literacy muscles brings intellectual and active engagement in a democratic society and the schools within. I hope that the lessons I learned from the “informationally underserved” provide you with ideas for authentically engaging with students and teachers when developing or using curated resources whether they be physical library books or digital resources. Democratic schools provide opportunities for all students to learn to be critical users of information, authentic creators of ideas, and lovers of literature.

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PART III

Common Good



The Galaxy Belongs to Them: Interests, Agency, and Democratic Schools

Jeff Petty

One of my colleagues recently worked a stint as an itinerant music teacher in elementary schools. She's a professional musician and the kind of ebullient teacher kids cluster around during lunch and breaks when they aren't required to be somewhere else. She told me this story about her first day with a group of first graders.

She asked them: "What are you learning about in school?" There was a long pause, as students looked around and tried to think of something. "Text features?" one of them eventually offered. Some others nodded gravely in affirmation.

"*Text features?*" my friend asked. "Hmm ... Well, what's the most *exciting* thing you're learning about? Like maybe in *science*?" Blank stares. Eventually one of them said, "We aren't learning science."

Then she asked, "Well, what *would* you learn about if you could learn about *anything*?" Suddenly everyone was talking at once:

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“Dinosaurs!”

“Color!”

“Pulleys!”

When I heard this story I was working as a school design coach, supporting a high school shifting to a more engaging approach to try to improve persistently poor student outcomes. One of their first steps was to tell students they could choose any topic they'd like to learn about and develop that into a project. It could be anything of interest and didn't need to have any obvious connection to school. Instead of excitedly calling out like the first graders, several of these students stated flatly that they have no interests. Their teachers asked me, as their school coach, how they could possibly make any progress with these students. Having worked in schools designed to start with and then cultivate students' interests rather than press on in indifference to them, I told them I thought this response had little to do with their students' lack of interests and was instead a function of their time in school. In fact, those students are probably interested in all sorts of things. They just can't imagine how that has anything to do with school.

What does it mean that small children don't see their interests in school, and older ones struggle even to engage the concept of interest while at school? Sadly, those first graders my friend worked with will likely in time internalize that what's interesting to them has no place in school. Apart from the students who drop out of school altogether, it's hardly surprising that some studies indicate fewer than forty percent of students in upper grades are intellectually engaged. A *New Yorker* cartoon by Liza Donnelly shows a mother greeting her young daughter who has just walked in the door from her first day of school. The little girl looks dejected, shoulders slumped. The mother says, “It was your first day—why not give it another twelve years?” (Donnelly, 2014).

I keep a quote close at hand from one of my earliest mentors in education, the late Vito Perrone: “The task for teachers is to become knowledgeable enough about their students' particular interests to build a substantial part of the curriculum around them” (Perrone, 1991). The zeal to press students earlier and harder to gain skills deemed essential later on seems well intentioned enough. But I worry that our current obsession with improving schools through uniform rigorous standards is taking us farther from Vito's ideal, and at the expense of the outcomes we hope for, namely that our students are increasingly prepared to be engaged,

successful contributors within their communities and to the collective global community. In other words, a system originally developed to support democracy may have evolved to undermine it.

Our obsession with accountability to standards is not only misguided, it's disingenuous.

If you are reading this and identify as a successful adult, I suspect you may be hard pressed right now to represent a system of linear equations as a single matrix equation in a vector variable; demonstrate knowledge of the foundational works of American literature from the eighteenth through early twentieth century, including how two or more texts from the same period treated similar themes or topics; or explain the process by which a gene is translated to a protein and the significance of various errors along the way to adaptation by natural selection. These are sample Common Core State Standards¹ in various subjects. The assumption is that, in order to be successful, high school students must master not just these but many more standards. In order to get to this level by high school, backward planning means even first graders must start by understanding concepts like text features. (I'm prompted to note here that I do not know, or at least am not aware that I know, what text features are.)

In numerous workshop presentations to roomfuls of presumably successful adults, I have asked for a show of hands to indicate who feels confident demonstrating these standards. Invariably, at most only one or two hands go up for each one; never the same person for more than one. Those who do raise their hands tend to be teachers of those subjects at the high school level. Apparently mastering these standards is not so essential to successful adulthood. What we have in common as effective adults is that we are great learners. If you don't know how to do those things I named, I suspect you could learn them by next week if you wanted to. You likely have a strong sense of who you are and a growth mindset. When you're interested in making something happen, you overcome obstacles. In fact, if you are passionate about something that requires you to develop new skills, including those named, it's unlikely anyone could prevent you from developing them. You likely have some leadership experience and a strong support network. If we want our schools to support our democracy, our common core ought not to be pre-identified bodies of academic content, but instead the non-cognitive competencies through which we acquire knowledge that has personal meaning to us. (See, for

¹ See <https://learning.ccsso.org/common-core-state-standards-initiative>

example, the eight non-cognitive variables identified in William Sedlacek's work.)

We need to design schools that attend to the myriad interests students bring to us as naturally curious people. What's interesting is all around us, and learning is everywhere. When we ignore our students' interests in dinosaurs, pulleys, color, and all sorts of other things, we hamstring the vehicle whereby they might come to master and continuously extend an array of rigorous academic skills and understandings. I'm not bashing algebra, American literature, or biology as worthwhile courses of study or deeply interesting topics. I am saying that those of us who cherish and actualize our knowledge in these areas didn't get there via standards; we got there through our interests.

I'm the founding principal of Highline Big Picture, a public school in south King County, Washington, serving about 240 students in grades six through twelve. We border one of the most ethnically diverse school districts in the United States, and more than half of our students qualify for free and reduced lunch, an indicator of economic hardship. Our school is part of the international Big Picture Learning network,² which originated in the late 1990s with a school called The Met, in Providence, Rhode Island. Met co-founders Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor are fond of saying that when invited by funders to develop a new innovative high school, they said, "We'll do it if we can forget everything we know about school and instead design it around everything we know about learning."

It turns out that forgetting everything we know about school in the United States is about as easy as forgetting what we know about white supremacy or patriarchy. How do we deconstruct what feels as familiar as the air we're breathing? Our schools and systems of schooling have systematized the ignoring of differences, of individuality, on an unprecedented scale. In the state where I live, like most every state in this country, graduation is determined by an accumulation of the same distribution of credits: four parts language arts, three parts social studies, three parts each of math and science, two parts art, etc. This is so ingrained in our cultural experience of education that we overlook its absurdity. Ninth grade in one place resembles ninth grade everywhere, like the reassuring sameness of a chain restaurant menu regardless of where we travel.

I propagated this problem in my early work as a school redesign coach. I advised leadership teams to start with their school community by asking

² See www.bigpicture.org

what every graduate should know and be able to do. Come to agreement as a team about these skills, this knowledge, and then look more outward to state standards and perhaps college admissions expectations. Then benchmark these by each grade level to determine what every eleventh grader should know, every tenth grader, and so on. Then I ran into Elliot Washor and Big Picture Learning.

I was coaching an alternative school in Federal Way, Washington, whose late career principal had decided she had to “do something better for these kids” before retiring. She had learned about Big Picture through her program officer at the Gates Foundation, and they had initiated work to transition this low-expectations last resort alternative school into something more hopeful.

As I urged clearly defined standards at each grade level, the Big Picture coaches, who had worked at The Met, in Providence, Rhode Island, the original and phenomenally successful Big Picture school, countered: “But every student is different. Why are you imposing the same learning expectations on them as if they are the same person?” I had no coherent answer to this, none that resonated as clearly as this truth, now seeming so self-evident. Most everything I had personally experienced about learning and teaching made a lot more sense in this new way of thinking about school. We learn through our interests. I recognized that what I hold most dear about myself and what I cherish most—my singularity and agency in the world—were undermined by how I had been advising teams to structure their schools.

A few years later, in 2005, in the adjacent school district, we started Highline Big Picture High School with thirty-four ninth graders. All were well below grade level in either math or language arts or both. Forty-five percent qualified for special education because of learning disabilities. One was a parent, and several were attempting ninth grade for the second or third time. We tried to stay true to what we understood to be Big Picture’s core ideas. Each student would develop a learning plan rooted in their interests. Each would be expected to pursue an internship two full days each week, with an adult in the community doing work aligned with their interests. Three times a year they would present their learning in an exhibition to a panel of peers, family members, school staff, and community guests. These conversations would inform updates to the learning plan. There were no formal classes or subject-area teachers, and instead students were grouped into advisories of about seventeen students. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays were spent in advisory working on projects

related to their learning plans, and Tuesdays and Thursdays were spent researching potential internship leads, contacting people in the community for what we called “informational interviews,” and following up on those with requests to do “shadow days” at various companies and organizations, and eventually internships. Advisories would stay together with the same advisor for all four years of high school. Sharing our most heartfelt interests is intimate and vulnerable and requires trust. Since students who have been in school for any length of time have every reason not to trust us with their interests, we structured the school to foster close multi-year relationships between students and staff.

At that time, our district did an annual student survey on a broad range of indicators. While our students continued to lag behind their peers on state assessments, we quickly led all schools in the district, including a regional magnet school, on most of the survey responses. These included “My teachers ask me to connect what I’m learning with the real world; my school helps me make plans for continuing my education beyond high school; there is at least one adult in my school who cares about me and knows me well; my culture and ethnicity are respected at this school; I feel supported and respected by teachers and staff; I have a voice in school decisions; I get to make choices about what I study in school; my teachers treat me as an intellectual person; and my teachers have high expectations of me.” We also led all schools on the following indicators: “How often do you consider the views of different races, religions, genders, or political beliefs in class discussions or assignments? How much has your class work emphasized applying ideas to solve real-world problems? And How often do you help set learning goals in your classes?” Not surprisingly, we had the lowest responses in the district, by a huge margin, to the prompts “I am bored in my classes” and “How often do you spend time on busy work that is meaningless?”

We were right to trust that these indicators of engagement would eventually translate to academic gains. (It also strikes me now how aligned some of these indicators are to functioning within a democracy.) Within a few years we were generally on par with other schools in language arts and math assessments. But since we had no classes, our students were not earning traditional credits. I had learned at the Federal Way school about a unique but grossly underutilized piece of legislation in Washington State that allows schools to apply for a waiver from credit-based graduation. It had been our plan from the outset to apply for this waiver, and in our third year, we became the second school in the state to receive it.

Writing this some fifteen years later, and drawing on several years of supporting other schools in Washington to receive this waiver in the process of redesigning engaging learning communities, I've come to believe that the credit or Carnegie unit³ is the single most intransigent barrier to creating the kinds of schools our students need. Credits, and specifically the need to accumulate the aforementioned distribution of them in order to graduate, dictate most every aspect of secondary school structure in the United States. They are the reason many teachers see upwards of one hundred students each week, far too many to form any kind of meaningful relationship around interests, let alone attend to the critical need of young people to process with caring adults all the changes and wonderings they face. This, in turn, leads to the greatest sadness about our schools—that so many students move through school with no meaningful adult connection and a growing sense that what is of interest to them is not of interest to their school or the adults who work there.

Liberated from the currency of credits, we were free to ask what would constitute real readiness to graduate from high school at the individual level and design our school around that. For us it was successfully implementing the learning plan through the various learning cycles of each year, culminating with a seventy-five page autobiography, a robust senior thesis project that contributes to the community, and an actionable post high school plan connected to interests and future aspirations, developed over multiple years with particular focus in the senior year. These were proxies for three attributes. We wanted our students to know themselves well, to be able to turn their hopes and ideas into meaningful action, and to have a plan for ongoing learning and development toward a future of their own design. The notion that grades and credits are essential to pursuing entrance to college is specious. Last year our twenty-seven graduating seniors accumulated roughly \$2.4 million in scholarships for post-secondary education.

If one part of democracy is the freedom to express and develop your singularity, another part is agency. Reading *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates, helped me to understand another aspect of what I hope

³ Also known as a “credit hour,” this is the standard metric of student progress in K-12 and higher education systems in the United States. A certain number of hours amount to a unit, a number of units amount to a credit, and an accumulation of credits results in some credential or degree. The assumption is that time equates to learning. The unit originated around 1906 with Andrew Carnegie’s pension system for American college faculty and was never intended to quantify student learning.

we are doing at Highline Big Picture. Coates describes the white people he observes in Manhattan cavorting in clubs, “spilling out of wine bars with sloshing glasses and without police.... They were utterly fearless. I did not understand it until I looked out on the street. That was where I saw white parents pushing double-wide strollers down gentrifying Harlem boulevards in T-shirts and jogging shorts. Or I saw them lost in conversation with each other, mother and father, while their sons commanded entire sidewalks with their tricycles. The galaxy belonged to them, and as terror was communicated to our children, I saw mastery communicated to theirs” (Coates, 2015).

What do we trust students to do in schools? Manage when they need to use the restroom? Do so without asking permission? What about developing their own learning plans and curriculum and co-creating the rubrics for assessing their work, or making decisions about the staffing and budget of the school? I was aware of my privilege as a white cis-gender straight⁴ male before reading Coates’s letter to his son, but I had not seen so clearly until then how our design of schools can cultivate or negate the agency of the young people to whom we will entrust the sustenance of our democracies.

My profoundest exposure to students really “owning the galaxy” of their school occurred in my first public school teaching job, in 1997 at a public school in Seattle called The Nova Project. Shortly after submitting my application to teach there, I got a call from a student informing me they’d like me to come in for an interview. On the appointed day I arrived and was greeted by a group of students who said they were on the hiring committee and that we’d first be walking together to a nearby Ethiopian restaurant for lunch, then we’d come back to school for the interview. The interview included the principal and other staff, but they were far outnumbered by students. Student leaders co-facilitated the interview.

Later, as a teacher at the school, I served on that committee. We had heated arguments over candidates. The school was governed by a weekly community forum that filled the cafeteria, and this too was co-chaired by students. To be a voting member, staff or student, you had only to attend two consecutive meetings. All decisions required “consensus minus one,” meaning that a decision could pass with one dissenter but not two. Often if one person disagreed with an important policy decision, another person

⁴ See <https://www.healthline.com/health/cisgender-vs-straight>

would stand in solidarity with them to block the decision until further discussion resolved the disagreement.

You didn't have to be at this school long to realize this essential aspect of its culture: adults never made decisions outside collaboration with students. The principal could have a compelling idea, or we might determine at the staff meeting some change that needed to happen, and the conversation would quickly turn to how to bring this up at the community forum or the appropriate student/staff committee in order to get it passed. Too many schools are just the opposite. Students attend school, grown-ups run it. But what better way to develop active agents of democracy than to invite students to co-direct something as complex and important and impactful on them as their school? Perhaps sadly predictably, most of the students at The Nova Project, at least when I taught there, were white. We, the mostly white staff, trusted them enough to invite them to join us in our fearlessness.

When I read *Between The World and Me*, I had left Highline Big Picture to work with Big Picture Learning as a regional director, supporting the development of more start-up and conversion Big Picture schools. In the seven or so years while I was away, the enrollment of the school shifted from serving mostly students who had experienced some failure in school to a whiter, more affluent demographic that suggested that well-resourced families were seeking out Big Picture as a favorable alternative to the district's larger comprehensive middle and high schools. I had seen this scenario play out with numerous schools I had coached. They began with a commitment to provide a more compelling option for students farthest from opportunity and falling out of the system. Then, once they were established as highly responsive learning communities supporting students to really author their futures, they became featured schools of choice in their districts, reducing access for students with little to no adult advocacy. It takes concerted and persistent effort to buck this trend.

When I learned in 2020 that Highline Big Picture's principal was departing for a position in the central office, I was immediately struck by desire to have my old job back. I was surprised by the intensity of that initial feeling and thought it might pass, but it didn't. It hasn't. I wanted to reverse the trend in enrollment and to shift the school to authentic co-governance by students and staff. These two charges have guided my work over the last two years. How do we enroll students farthest from opportunity and those most likely to be disengaging from school, and then how do we entrust governance and leadership of the school to their capable

minds and hearts? How do we cultivate their sense that the galaxy belongs to them and encourage their fearlessness in expressing their singularity and agency in meaningful contexts?

Through targeted recruitment, we have shifted our enrollment pattern from three-fourths of incoming students coming from the lowest-poverty elementary schools in 2020, to two-thirds coming from the highest poverty schools for the most recent incoming sixth grade class. Last year we piloted various student/staff governance groups to take on issues of concern to students, but we faltered in not building these into our schedule in a way that supported robust participation. I am reminded here of the advice of a close mentor, Dr. Danique Dolly, who said, “I don’t think people pay attention to how much culture is mediated by structure. If you’re not doing something (structural) to change or effect culture, you get informal culture.” We hadn’t attended to the structural needs of supporting a culture of student governance. Through various iterations, we now have multiple student/staff teams working to address various aspects of running the school, and our leadership council includes key adult leaders—me, our instructional lead, our school social worker, our special teams lead—and student representatives from each of the aforementioned governance teams. If we are successful this year in transitioning to authentic staff/student shared leadership, the next frontier will be families. How does our school increase the democratic agency of its families, and/or improve the quality of their lives and participation in democracy, as a result of their child’s enrollment in our school? What tangible evidence might indicate this?

Democratic education is to me about implementing school at the scale of one student at a time. I sometimes describe this task as imagining you’re implementing school for your nieces and nephews. If you didn’t know anything about school, and instead met a young person who saw in you someone they could trust, and ventured to share something personal and true about themselves, some interest they wanted to explore, how would you respond? Would you retreat to develop an extended curriculum around that topic, including assessments? Would accountability for learning be top of mind? I suspect not.

Accountability, our collective educational obsession, is in many ways the opposite of trust. I suspect instead that you would respond by seeking to apply your adult resourcefulness to expose them to the next tentative step on that path of curiosity. Help them discover who they are and what they mean. School districts, likewise, ought to orient themselves not

around creating great schools in the same mold. Leave that approach to the Starbucks and McDonalds of the world. Instead, districts ought to seek to understand and create the conditions in which might emerge highly individualized schools that partner with their students, families, and communities to convey to students and families that we honor your differences and all the epistemologies therein, and we welcome and trust you to command the entire sidewalk. I believe our collective galaxy depends on no less.

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With Our Eyes on the Students. City of Berlin School: Keys to a Democratic Transformation

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In order to fully understand our school and its philosophy, you will first need to learn a little bit about who we are and how we became teachers. We are both first-generation professionals. We are also the first in our families who have both studied at the school and university level in public education. Throughout our lives we faced vulnerability, endured poverty and confronted social injustice firsthand. On a personal level, everything we have achieved has to do with effort and perseverance. Professionally, we have worked across the different types of education providers that exist in Chile's educational system, both private and subsidized. Our commitment to democratic education emerges directly from the core of our personal stories and experiences.

To advocate for democratic education is to be able to listen to what our community stakeholders say about their needs to obtain greater social and emotional development. When we reflect on this, we are reminded of the

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African proverb that says that “the child who is not embraced by his tribe will burn the village to feel its warmth.” The episodes of social conflict Chile has experienced over the past three years also come to mind: despite all the lack of opportunities that this society offers (or does not offer) to our children and young people, we believe that they lack a sense of welcomeness, of feeling loved, listened and understood. If we don’t change the adult-centric educational view at every level, and don’t dedicate ourselves to embracing our student’s experiences, future generations of young people will continue to burn villages to feel the warmth of their tribe.

The Berlin City School is fifty-eight years old. It is located on Los Placeres hill, one of the largest geographical and demographic hills in Valparaíso. The school serves four- to thirteen-year-old students from early education levels to eighth grade. We work with a student population with a social vulnerability index of 92%, which in this case is representative of high level of marginalization in variables such as income, household conformation, parental engagement and health, among others.

The school currently serves 239 students. This might not represent a high percentage of the enrollment at the community level, since the Valparaíso Local Public Education Service (SLEP) has a total enrollment of 17,000 students. But when we started working together in 2017, we had an even smaller student population. In 2015, as a result of a long teacher strike, the school only had 115 students. However, enrollment has grown progressively every year since 2017. A larger student population has positively impacted the school’s financial health,¹ allowing us to continue to focus on attracting more families and students.

When Francisco started his term as the school principal, he had a clear vision of the type of education he wanted the school to offer to the community. He wanted to create a school based on the mission of ensuring students’ rights, focusing in aspects essential to build greater educational social justice for all the children enrolled in the school. This is the vision that configured our journey and its milestones.

Back in 2017 some of our first tasks were to revamp many of the bureaucratic internal processes, so that we could align our expectations to democratize the operation of the school. This meant that the sociocultural and psycho-emotional needs of students needed to become an essential asset. Hence, the way we designed our school’s Institutional Educational

¹In Chile, public and subsidized schools receive funding based on their enrollment and attendance.

Project (PEI, for its acronym in Spanish) and the Educational Improvement Plan (PME, for its acronym in Spanish) needed to be in direct relationship to the needs of the school's stakeholders.

The PEI defines a school's values and key pedagogical principles, its goals, as well as pedagogical approaches and the roles of each of the members of the educational community (non-teaching workers of the school, families and students). The PME operationalizes what the PEI declares, establishing short, medium and long-term goals, and setting the strategies to carry out the PEI. These documents are relevant because beyond being mere pointless paperwork, they offer the possibility that allowed us to plan and explore how to build institutional alignment across important domains. In our school, both documents were created with the direct participation of all the actors of the educational community: teachers, non-teaching workers, families, students and management team. Consultations, surveys, meetings, workshops and days of reflection ensured stakeholder involvement along the way. Finally, both institutional documents were ratified by democratic vote.

In this chapter, we wish to share with you some of the most relevant strategies incorporated in this democratic planning process. The following points introduce a brief description of the actions we've taken and offer a reflection on the opportunities and challenges of enacting the type of democratic and participatory path we've chosen to follow.

A) CREATION OF AN INNOVATION UNIT

Our school is determined to pursue the value of *Pedagogical Innovation* as one of the core attributes of its identity. This is expressed in the school's Educational Improvement Plan, which explains that the school is focused on promoting the design of pedagogical practices of an innovative and experimental nature that, in a collaborative and inclusive manner, encourage analysis and reflection processes to positively impact the development of student skills, attitudes and learning, promoting creativity, decision-making, and problem solving.

The desire to innovate stems out of the need to listen to all stakeholders of the school community, in order to accurately capture the way in which our students, workers and families propose to address their various needs. During the pandemic, especially under the strict quarantine implemented by the Chilean government, this permanent openness to innovation led us to reflect on how this new scenario could be seen as an opportunity, rather

than a weakness. Under the social distancing period, many of our decisions were consulted through virtual surveys open to all community stakeholders. However, with the return to face-to-face instruction that followed one of the world's longest school closures, we experienced a hostile school climate we had neither anticipated nor were prepared to address. For a while, it seemed as if the school's collective identity was suddenly replaced by a disconnected conjunction of individual beings. Little by little we are resuming our path of collective coexistence, finding ourselves again one step at a time.

This innovation core value sparked the creation of our school's Innovation Unit. This is a space in which our school develops collective agreements, protocols and projects, mainly oriented to transforming instruction and the school's curriculum. Some of the key initiatives include the *No-grade Project*; the *Socio-emotional Linking Weeks*; and campaigns to explore student interests, to shape the complementary curriculum all public schools in Chile can develop. We believe that most of these experiences and ways to enact our democratic orientation relate to the notion of distributed leadership (Maureira Cabrera, 2018, p. 2) with the wellbeing, learning and rights of our students at its core.

B) CREATION OF OUR SCHOOL'S MANAGEMENT TEAM

Another key initiative was the creation of our school's Management Team. This unit comprises a member of the faculty, the teacher that leads of the Innovation Unit, the leader of School Culture (or Climate), the coordinator of the School Integration Program (PIE, for its acronym in Spanish), and the school's leadership team: the Principal, the Safeguarding Officer, and the head of the Pedagogical Technical Unit (UTP, for its acronym in Spanish).

The mission of the Management Team is to ensure the viability of the different curricular and pedagogical processes carried out in the school. This team operates under the principles of joint decision-making and is fully committed to processes of constant evaluation and compliance, holding all stakeholders accountable to honor any agreements that might have been made. Ultimately, the Management Team will measure the impact of the actions developed during each school period.

While setting up leadership teams is a common practice in Chilean schools, our decision to expand this team intended to foster greater inclusion and participation from other relevant leaders in our community.

Through the simultaneous participation of all stakeholders, we expected to gain alignment between decisions both at the senior leadership level and in the classroom. As of 2022, a representative of the non-teaching school workers (clerks, administrative staff, classroom assistants) has also joined the Management Team.

C) VALUES AS A PATHWAY TO EXCELLENCE

In our school, students have the opportunity to recognize their peers when they think that they demonstrate commitment to our core values: autonomy, creativity, participation, perseverance, respect for others, and coexistence with the environment. Students are invited to vote in order to democratically decide which classmates should be recognized for each value. This initiative is not restricted only to students. Teachers, non-teaching workers and the management team can also participate, although our votes do not have the same weight as those of the students. The final decision falls, ultimately, on the will of the student body.

Unlike most schools in our country, Berlin City School does not participate in an annual or semester recognition of students' academic performance. The recognition of commitment to our core values is the only award our students receive. This approach is highly strategic and is meant to counter the development of an individualistic approach that competition has baked into our education system. Our aim is to seize processes of student recognition to promote attributes like camaraderie, collaboration, mutual support and learning from peers. This decision has given students without an outstanding academic track the opportunity to be publicly recognized for other attributes, such as their leadership and autonomy. Through this recognition we hope to help our students to see their own talents and capabilities and to find ways to share them with others.

D) STUDENT'S INTEREST AT THE CORE OF THE CURRICULUM

The extended School Day (JEC, for its acronym in Spanish), a national reform started back in 1997, gives schools the opportunity to receive complementary resources to fund weekly hours of instruction outside of the limits of the national curriculum (*free disposal hours is the term used*). However, given constraints such as the need to perform at high levels at national high-stakes standardized tests, many schools use this time to

focus on workshops and special support to help students improve their academic achievement, especially in language and mathematics.

In the case of the Ciudad de Berlín school, *free disposal hours* are used to implement workshops according to themes and disciplines proposed by our students. This information is constantly gathered by the school's Management Team through surveys, offering students the choice between carrying on with whatever workshop they are participating in or proposing new alternatives. After analyzing the survey thoroughly, the team summarizes the findings in a report which indicates key themes; this report proves to be extremely useful and allows us to prioritize. Finally, the feasibility of carrying out the proposed workshops is determined against the available school budget, and also in direct consultation with teachers, so that they can assess whether the proposed workshops resonate with their own interests, skills and expertise.

Currently, our school has a total of weekly six *free disposal hours*. Two of these are used for a Personal and Emotional Development Workshop, planned by the UTP Team and the School Climate team, and carried out by head teachers. The remaining four hours offer options in areas like Arts, Music, Debate, Gender and Diversity, Journalism, Environment, Gardening, Sports, among others. Also, after school activities like Football, Handball, Skating, Chess, Dance, Reading Club, and Folklore address students' interests and proposals.

This year we asked teachers, non-teaching staff and families to take part in the survey. The goal was to explore similarities and differences between student and adult preferences. Students continue to have the same interests. They continue to request personal and emotional development workshops and include new interests like a video game workshop or a board games workshop; they also expressed interest in receiving cooking lessons. Adults, on the other hand, expressed interest in generating alternatives to support student's academic achievement through more focus on reading comprehension skills, basic math operations and problem solving. Families expressed a strong desire to have English classes available from the earliest educational levels.

E) NO-GRADE PROJECT

Starting in 2017, the school worked on the design of a new learning evaluation protocol. This process was open to participation of all members of the school community. The goal was to balance the focus in learning

outcomes with process quality measures and character development metrics. This drove us to think of ways to build more on formative assessments in order to communicate both to students and to families the degree of progress in the development of abilities and/or skills included in the national curriculum.

The *No-grade project* is based on the principles of learning oriented assessment, following the guidelines of the Assessment Reform Group (Broadfoot et al., 1999). “The assessment for learning is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence to be used by students and their teachers to decide where students are in their learning processes, where they need to go and how best to get there” (Broadfoot et al., 1999).

The Chilean education system has traditionally assigned a highly relevant role to grades, using them as requisites to apply for scholarships, college admissions, and other state benefits. The grading system in Chile has a grade scale from 1.0 to 7.0 and the passing grade is 4.0 or higher. Hence, the *No-grade Project* implied the progressive replacement of the traditional system of qualification by a system of qualitative appreciation of student performance.

Our first step in this process was to implement the new approach at the preschool level which is much more open for qualitative assessments of a student’s progress. We presented the project to the families, explaining that our goal was to formulate an evaluation system “without grades” focused on and for the progress of learning and autonomy of students. We also said that our intentions were to reveal the progress in student learning, putting their individual progress at the center, focusing on what the student has achieved, what is yet to be achieved and what has not been achieved, through qualitative assessment instruments. These ideas were very well received by the community. Noticeably, all of the students from that first cohort of the No-Grade Project still remain enrolled in our school.

Another key step was the formation of a group called “School Success,” which received training on new assessment strategies. To date we continue to use systematic training, with constant support from professors from the University of Chile and the Catholic University of Valparaíso. We also collaborate with the University of Chile, participating with a group of schools that promote innovation.² And with the Catholic University of Valparaíso, we are supporting the creation of another network of schools that want to implement alternative student learning evaluation protocols.

² Network of schools for the promotion of assessment innovation

These steps have contributed to the sense of professionalization among our school's teachers. But implementing this project has not been easy. They have had to learn to navigate the national curriculum, on the subjects and grades they teach, determining the criteria through which they will capture the essential learning their students need to develop, as well as ways through which they can assess that qualitatively, in alignment to our school core values.

In spite of many challenges, we have been able to transform the national curriculum into a sequence of key learning objectives that help us to think about learning in terms of yearly expected outcomes, palpable for both students and teachers. This approach has proved to be extremely valuable, particularly with the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic, and it enabled us to focus only on what we considered the most relevant aspects of the curriculum during the period of remote instruction.

Our new assessment system is first and foremost centered on our students and their trajectories. We work hard to provide information about student learning at each educational level, including their achievements, challenges, and preferences. Teachers are essential in collecting such valuable information and they always count on the support of the school's student support team. Collaborating together, teachers and counselors conduct interviews, focus groups, and process background information from the student's previous years, establishing the basis of each student's work over the year. This initial evaluation and assessment process takes place during the first three weeks of the school year; this information is presented to the teachers' council no later than the first week of April.³ After that point, the implementation of differentiated learning and assessment plans begins.

Feedback is a fundamental component of this approach: we foster the participation and commitment of students, allowing them to take part in the development of their evaluation approaches, protocols and tools. This opens up the floor for a wide set of possibilities, and it even allows to expand the scope to have students participating in self-assessments and peer-assessments. Improving these last elements remains one of our current concerns.

Families access information about student's progress individually and collectively. We conduct parent-teacher interviews; we also produce and

³The academic school year in Chile begins the first week of march, and typically finishes the second week of December.

send written summaries on the different activities carried out by students in the classroom. And we have one formal instance, at the end of each semester, where the head teacher meets with parents to deliver a semi-annual assessment report, which indicates achievements, challenges and opportunities for the family to engage and support their student's learning. Families highly appreciate this.

Democratizing the ways students participate in learning assessment processes remains a challenge that is far from fully mastered. Today, our students can decide for themselves what they think is the most appropriate way to demonstrate their learning. But this is much easier for our older students than for the younger ones. The development of values and attitudes such as autonomy as well as the ability to critically judge one's own performance is an important aspect of this work. We believe it supports both learning and a greater democratization within our community.

F) SOCIOEMOTIONAL LINKING WEEKS

Since March 2019, we have implemented two *Socioemotional Linking Weeks* that take place at the beginning of the school period (March), when students return from their summer vacation. This strategy attends to students' needs to adjust and adapt to the expectations of rigorous academic work after a long summer break. In these *Linking Weeks*, we all become participants in a process in which we replace formal class time for activities focused on the socioemotional well-being of every member of our school.

During these initial days, we cover a variety of topics and activities that foster emotional self-awareness, self-knowledge and generation of bonds between peers through play and teamwork. Students and teachers also have the opportunity to invest time getting to learn from our school's core values. And they also have time to remember or to become familiar with the school's rules and coexistence agreements. We also use this time to review the school's guidelines about fostering positive habits, like practicing sports or healthy eating. For instance, students learn about the type of snacks we encourage. And finally, students have the opportunity to elect their class representatives.

These activities are complemented with a full-school meeting the day before the beginning of the school year. Families, students, teachers, and leaders join together to recognize the physical space that will host our

activities during the year.⁴ We introduce the head teachers of each grade, present any relevant changes in the educational/instructional priorities and welcome everyone that is new to the community. The week culminates in a festival of collective celebrations with arts and music.

Socioemotional *Linking Weeks* have also been used as buffers against challenges like the large social manifestations that broke out in Chile in October 2019, as well as during the pandemic. This week created a safe space for students and the whole school community to reflect on what our country experienced, and to process how to adapt to unpredictability and uncertainty. This is why during 2022 we also organized a Socioemotional Linking Week right after the winter break. This strategy has helped to improve our school's climate. We see our students demonstrate lower levels of anxiety. And we also noticed a more cohesive community.

In this chapter, we hope to have portrayed some of the potential for democratic transformation that emerges when, as school leaders and educators, we are willing to see and to listen to our students. We consider ourselves lucky, because this approach has been embraced by local authorities and the families in our community. This support is essential to confront the existence of barriers and challenges that hinder the potential for this transformation. An old outdated school infrastructure erodes many of the efforts to make for the community to feel that they are in the best school available. But our vision is clear, as well as our commitment to continue to walk this democratic path alongside all the members in our community.

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⁴We have observed that familiarity with the school's infrastructure lowers our students' anxiety levels and facilitates the experience around the first week of class.

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From Being a Student in a Democratic School to Founding One

Mirko Chardin

Back in September 1994, I had felony gun charges, had been expelled from three prior schools and had every intention to drop-out as soon as I turned sixteen. I was a brown boy who believed that school was not for me, the secret child of a prominent Roman Catholic Priest and the only child of an immigrant bi-polar schizophrenic mother. Neither I nor my issues were addressed, seen, or heard in school. In fact, the culture and climate of most schools I had attended communicated that they were not designed for individuals such as myself. They were designed for middle-class white students. I was tolerated but only if compliant and willing to exchange my sense of self, identity and culture by assimilation. If not, then my punishment would be to be labeled as a troubled youth, thereby becoming a manifestation of the often racist and classist narratives that were associated with learners like me, who did not reflect dominant culture or privilege.

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FENWAY HIGH IN BOSTON: A DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL

In 1994, I found a democratic school—Fenway High in Boston, which changed my perception of school. My experiences at Fenway High were life changing as I encountered through first-hand experience the benefits of democratic schools. Fenway was a student-centered institution, where young people were encouraged to express themselves creatively; engage in interdisciplinary thinking; be active, engaged citizens; and prepare for college. Where representation mattered, the faculty reflected the community and student body, and the content was always taught with overt and obvious connections to what was relevant to students in their lives outside of school. That experience was transformative for me, because it was the first time that I saw the connection between educational experiences and life outside of school. Or that education was supposed to be done with you and for you as opposed to being done to you. At Fenway I learned that the true purpose of education was to equip you with tools and skills that empower you to be able to make sense of and navigate the world outside of school. This was consistently reinforced through their culture of keeping the authentic voices of both student and adult learners (staff, faculty and community) at its center. These experiences sent me on a journey from the streets to becoming an educator, who's been committed to recreating the types of learning environments that changed my life. My greatest hope is that through this work, we will be able to help our society re-envision what school could and should be. That all students—despite their background, status, or how they choose to identify—can authentically access relevant and challenging learning experiences and develop into the leaders that our world and society so desperately needs.

PUTNAM AVENUE UPPER SCHOOL

Vision

After experiencing the power of democratic school as a student at Fenway High, I was compelled to continue this work as a classroom teacher, youth advocate and eventually as a school leader. This work was central to the launching of Putnam Avenue Upper School in Cambridge, MA. I founded the school in September 2012. We developed the school, from the ground up, to be a democratic space, centered on Equity, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Community Partnership & Student Voice. We honored

being a democratic school by intentionally keeping the authentic voices of both student and adult learners (staff, faculty and community) at the center of our work and decision making. For example, our core values were democratically chosen. They were passion, pride, ownership, balance and perseverance. Our vision was simply to ensure that all of our students are on trajectory to the good life, that being the best possible quality of life in adulthood, as defined by our young people. This school's work in equity and democratic process has led to it being highlighted both locally and nationally, including being one of three schools which were designated as exemplars of equity in action by the Massachusetts Department of Secondary and Elementary Education.¹

FROM THE GROUND UP: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

I led that school community for nine years. When hired as the founding head for Putnam Avenue Upper School, my goal was to create a democratic school community that kept the authentic voices of both student and adult learners (staff, faculty and community) at its center. However, I was faced with the following challenge: the school population was middle school students who were funneled in from three diverse K-8 Schools that would no longer be serving middle schoolers as a result of the opening of this new school. Not only would students be coming but also faculty and staff who have never worked with each other before and represented very different school communities, values and norms. Each of us, including myself, brought with us the baggage of our prior experiences with school and a variety of different expectations based on those experiences, along with fear, trauma and anxiety.

I quickly discovered that lack of trust affected the foundational strength of our community. How would we create a sense of trust among individuals who were coming together not by choice, but because of this new structure, along with a sprinkling of new individuals who did not know the community and a leader who was young and not known by any? At that point, we weren't a school and certainly were not a community simply because we would put together with each other. We needed a sense of purpose and identity around what it meant to be together. We needed this to give ourselves and each other permission to disassociate from our previous experiences with school because this school would be different. By

¹<https://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/culturally-responsive/profile-series-paus.docx>

starting with a sense of purpose and identity that would come from the voices of its constituents, this school would be unique. I knew this from my experiences as a young person at Fenway and was thankful to have that experience to rely upon as an exemplar of what this work should look and feel like.

A powerful lesson from Fenway High was to always start with the end in mind. This meant starting with a clear and focused vision. This process would serve the purpose of creating a collaborative sense of purpose, which would become the bedrock of our school culture through a democratic process that would begin to normalize the usage of faculty, staff, student, caregiver and community a voice.

We began to work on the vision statement at our first faculty meeting where I shared about the notion of core values and having an agreed upon set of principles that would guide our school community. I then presented the following words as examples of values that resonated with me. I wanted the faculty to react to these terms and provide feedback on and/or suggest others. These were the terms: Passion, Pride, Ownership, Balance, Perseverance. I did not expect the words to resonate with the team. In fact I had assumed that we would be considering the terms for quite some time, but I was wrong. We utilized protocols from the school reform initiative (School Reform Initiative Protocols, *n.d.*)² to discuss our thoughts and reaction. Quickly, we came to consensus that these terms were the values we desired to frame our school through a democratic process which both acknowledged and included the voices of all.

FRAMING OUR SCHOOL

What resonated with the founding faculty about the terms were their application in the world outside of school and that they did not sound like educational jargon. We next shared these terms with students and caregivers who also responded positively. Then as a school community, we spent a year and a half exploring how we would come to a consensus to give these terms specific meanings that reflected how we would use them to support and guide our work. The process of calibrating was not easy, but was very necessary. The words of the core values resonated with all of us, and we felt pride in knowing that we as a community had decided upon them. Yet at the same time, we each interpreted them differently and

²<https://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/protocols/>

expected each other to interpret them through our own unique lens. This showed us that although we had democratically chosen these terms, we would have to dig deeper into the realm of listening to each other as we negotiated the definitions. We also had to keep using the terms in our context (our school community) so that we would stay on the same page. Thus, our democratic process meant hours of listening sessions and revisions until we landed on what's below. This is an example of a democratic process because this vision and these values represent the thinking of all constituents of the school community. All constituent groups were involved in the process, and the commitment was to continue the process until through consensus. All constituents were satisfied with the end result:

VISION: At the Putnam Avenue Upper School, we believe that all of our students can and will be successful in and out of school and beyond, no matter what their circumstances are. We believe that our students are headed toward the “**Good Life.**” That is, we believe that our students will become successful and contributing members of society with the best possible quality of life. In order to live the “Good Life,” students will develop a sense of mastery of our core values of **passion, pride, and ownership with balance and perseverance.**

PASSION: It is passion that drives our community toward excellence. More specifically, our passion is for the pursuit of **academic excellence** through effort and the pursuit of **social justice** through recognizing the different experiences that come with race, class, gender, sexual identity, ability, and religion. We believe it is our responsibility to use our knowledge to better the world we live in.

PRIDE: We take pride in our **identities** and the **impact** we have on both individuals and the larger society. We think not only about the here and now but about the future as well, considering carefully how each choice we make will impact the future of our own lives as individuals and the future of our collective community.

OWNERSHIP: A great school relies on a strong sense of ownership, and we demonstrate ownership through **reflection** and **planning.** By committing to goals, developing clear plans for achieving those goals, and regularly reflecting on the progress we have made toward reaching our goals, we are accountable to ourselves and to our community.

BALANCE: We believe that being well-rounded is essential to our overall success and quality of life. In addition to academic pursuits, we seek balance through participating in **activities outside of school.** We celebrate

our academic and extracurricular interests and know that our school culture will be balanced and healthy only if it is made up of balanced and healthy individuals.

PERSEVERANCE: We recognize that our relentless quest for excellence is full of obstacles and conflict. We turn stumbling blocks into stepping stones and demonstrate perseverance by **identifying challenges and striving to overcome them**. We choose not to see obstacles as moments of defeat but as moments to grow and make ourselves stronger.

STRENGTHENING LIFELONG DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLING

In all of our processes, we were intentionally democratic: grounded in the notion of collective voice. This proved to be the cornerstone of the school community's health and eventual success. Having the courage to embrace vulnerability and dive deeper into reinforcing the deployment of rituals, routines, systems and structures that honored and centered around collective voice was at the apex of all positive institutional growth and development.

For example, when we encountered the typical crisis of clashes between students and educators, toxic culture, high discipline referrals, suspensions and low high stakes test achievement scores, we turned to vulnerability and collective voice first by engaging in a public survey process, which asked students and faculty the same questions about their perceptions and experiences of the school. The most powerful survey came from a question that asked if students were treated with respect and dignity and were they well cared for and well known to school staff. The staff overwhelmingly (80%) responded yes, that they work hard to communicate care and were available both before and after school and many wished they had attended schools like ours. The students on the other had an overwhelming 80% consistent response in stating that they did not feel safe, well known or cared for. This was shocking and painful for faculty and myself to grapple with and, at the same time, remarkably powerful. It reinforced the fact that even if we believed that we initially designed a democratic school that would center around the voice of our students, we needed their voices on a regular basis to ensure that we were not missing the mark. We needed to normalize seeking and utilizing student voice so that the impact of our work was in line with our intent.

That experience led us to investigate restorative practice (Novak Education, 2022), which are practices that restore agency through

listening and acknowledge the voice and experiences of others. We did this not just for the sake of having an alternative to traditional disciplinary practices, but to layer the facilitation of the development of a culture of proactive and positive intentional power sharing, listening and constituent agency. If we were to be democratic, we needed feedback regularly about everything from day-to-day classes to large aspects of what we were trying to accomplish. Listening did not mean agreeing; it meant developing understanding of each other's perspectives, perceptions and experiences so that we could proactively take each other into consideration as best we could, by honoring Anderson's conditions of nurture (Anderson, 2016) which are being safe, inclusion and collaboration.

This also led to pursue our equity/cultural proficiency work by intentionally tying it to instruction by the *Going Beyond Access Framework* (Chardin, 2020) which I developed. This framework is grounded in the work of Dr. Beverly Daniels Tatum, Dr. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Dr. Christopher Emdin. The framework comprises three components: impact over intentions, learner visibility and authentic relevance.

- **Impact Over Intentions:** According to Dr. Beverly Daniels *Tatum*, “the work is not about intentions; it’s about impact.” One of the ways that we address the question of whether or not we are valuing impact over intentions is through restorative practices. Restorative Practices are a range of approaches— affective statements, affective questions, impromptu conferences, Tier 1 Circles, Tier 2 Restorative Circles, and Tier 3 Restorative Conferences—that aim to develop community and to manage conflict and tensions by repairing harm and restoring relationships. Since its inception, our office referrals have been reduced by half and suspensions have been cut by two-thirds. It is important to note that restorative practices work in concert with a range of strategies that we have incorporated into our practice, including: staffing, cultural proficiency, professional learning, student engagement, relationship building, and objective-driven instruction.
- **Learner Visibility:** Drawing on Dr. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot’s work on voice, value, and visibility, we ask the question, “Can all students see themselves reflected in our work?” We have been committed to actively recruiting faculty and staff who represent and reflect the diversity of our students; and, for the last 3 years we have had a faculty and staff which is more than 50% people of color. Learner

visibility has also been the frame for us to consider how we are including windows and mirrors in our curriculum as well as on the walls of our classrooms and the hallways of our building.

- **Authentic Relevance:** Authentic relevance, derived from Dr. Christopher Emdin's *Reality Pedagogy*, asks us to consider: Is the work authentically relevant and how do we know? This requires that we must know and work in conjunction with both our students and their families. Two ways we do this are through our school-wide **advisory system** (which includes: a core-value focused portfolio, an organization system, independent reading goals, and Story of Self) and **family engagement** strategies (which include: rolling conferences, Community Conversations on Identity & Diversity, Annual Back to School Night & Community Cookout, and International Potluck & Report Card Pick Up).

This also influenced our commitment to developing multiple professional learning opportunities which normalized through design, democratic practice through listening and learning together. This allowed staff to identify what we were exploring and provided options in regard to how they could choose to engage.

- Staff Meetings (which have focused on foundational texts such as Glenn Singleton's *Courageous Conversations About Race* and Zaretta Hammond's *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*), which were Universally Designed to taking into consideration variability among staff including identity and that provided choices and options in regard to participation and engagement. This means that we communicated to staff that we trusted them, by providing them with choice in what they would learn as well as how they would participate.
- Staff Intensives (choice offerings including determined by staff based on areas of need that they'd like to explore and develop additional expertise in. Some examples of these include The State of Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's Inclusive Practice Academy; Design Thinking; Race, Gender, & Intersectionality; Restorative Practices Through Cogenerative Groups; Neurodiversity & Cool Teaching Stuff). Many of these were facilitated by staff, and if no one on the team had expertise in the content that the staff wanted to explore, we'd bring in outside experts.

- Common Planning Times three times a week, which served as intentional learning communities as opposed to professional learning communities.
- Instruction & Learning (examining student work, instruction, and data) through usage of protocols to normalize public practice, public critic and colleague-driven critical feedback to peers.
- Student Support (strengths-based, inquiry approach to supporting all students; grounded in restorative practice) to ensure that the approach was outcome-driven and in a manner that ensured students were not shamed or blamed.
- Team Time & Logistics (time to plan and build the team) for teachers to meet without administration to plan, bond and support each other.
- School-Level Department Time focused on ambitious instructional strategies and making thinking visible, to reinforce that we were all corporately on the same page and focused on the same goals. We used a less is more approach to ensure that we only worked on 2–3 rich and big goals at a time.
- This work is reinforced through walkthroughs, modeling, informal observations, and coaching; again to ensure that we were lifting up being in a culture of public practice which included critic from peers, students, community members and caregivers.
- Community Conversations About Race and Identity with Caregivers and Community members, as a means of creating a space and vehicle for adults in the community to learn about race and identity to support their capacity to participate in and support our work.

CONCLUSION

As educators, our mission is to solve the question: How do we create school communities that have the courage and willingness to do education differently? We need to recognize that we must not solely focus on test scores but we must understand that we are dealing with human beings that someday are going to take over this world. To me, this means fully embracing the words of John Dewey, “that school is not a rehearsal for life, it is life.” Our institutions need to be as authentic as possible to honor the great responsibility they have. Truly being authentic means embracing having a clear sense of vision as well as a firm commitment to our goals, with the acknowledgment of achieving them through flexible means,

which include normalizing vulnerability by ensuring that voice and democratic practices are at the center of the work. My experiences as a student and Fenway High and then as the leader of the Putnam Avenue Upper School serve as evidence that when educators are committed to the notion of democratic schools, they can make magic happen, by transforming the lives of all of those involved in the process.

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Lift Every Voice: A Case for Democratic Music Education

Isaiah Hawkins

When I was a child, I emphatically rejected the idea of ever learning how to play the piano.

It always appeared to me as the stereotypical activity for “smart” suburban kids, and since I fell into that category, it was just expected of me. But the prospect of spending hours of lessons and rigorous practice sessions on fingerings, posture, and all the other aspects of early classical music training never appealed to me. Even as I learned other instruments, from recorder, to guitar, to clarinet and eventually bass clarinet (which often comically towered over my small frame), I never established strict practice routines, and one by one they eventually fell out of my life as well. However, around my second year of high school, I picked up a peculiar habit. After all the students and teachers had left, I started to sneak into the back closet of the music classroom. I would close the door, turn off the lights, and make my way to the electronic keyboard that rested there. For a half hour to an hour at a time, multiple times a week, I would just explore the instrument with no knowledge of formal technique whatsoever. Using a harmonic language that I developed from my music classes,

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my time in All-State honors choirs, musical influences at home, or even the songs of my church choir, I taught myself to improvise and express the musical ideas that were deep in my mind, using this instrument that I never thought I would ever sit down and play.

Following my high school education, I attended the Michigan State University College of Music and received a Bachelor of Music in Music Education. While there, I received classical vocal training from some of the nation's foremost opera singers and choral conductors and deepened my understanding of Western music theory and history. At the same time, I fell deeply in love with contemporary a cappella (as made famous in the movie *Pitch Perfect*), as a way to blend choral technique with a more diverse and relevant set of musical repertoire. I grew immensely in this environment directing and arranging music for my own ensemble, State of Fifths, which went on to compete in and win a number of regional competitions and awards. I later expanded to arrange for and coach scholastic and professional groups across the Midwestern United States.

This type of broad exploration is often missing within academic discussions about music education. If featured in sociology studies, the subject area is often only heralded for positive statistical relationships between taking music classes and standardized test scores. Music education advocates, seeking any ammunition to fight against the tide of shrinking funding, will then lift up these arguments with administrators and legislators. Even thriving music education programs often resemble the types of lessons that I rejected as a child. Choirs, bands, and orchestras mimic conservatory models, rarely deviating from classical repertoire and technique. Genres of popular music are often only included as “dessert”, a final concert reward after spending the year on what directors deem to be more meaningful content.

These recognitions are what first led me into music education policy, before shifting to education policy and public policy more broadly. Pursuing this, I came to attend the Harvard Kennedy School of Government with focuses in Education Policy and Democracy. In my second year, I had the immense privilege of studying with Dr. Nathan at the Graduate School of Education and joining EDU A310S, a course at the intersection of my interests where we observed examples of democratic schools and constructed frameworks of democratic education based on our observations and prior experiences, which forms the basis for this chapter.

I argue that this status quo represents neither the proper goals, justifications, nor methods of music education, and will apply the pillars of my framework of democratic education to the context of a music classroom, in hopes of presenting a general model of Democratic Music Education.

FRAMEWORK FOR DEMOCRATIC MUSIC EDUCATION

Equitable Decision-Making

Democratic music education begins with a policy landscape created through equitable decision-making.

Democracy in the broadest sense is defined by the ability of a population to have meaningful input on governing decisions to which they are subjected. In a government sense, definitions range from the presence of free and fair elections to the incorporation of equal voice and equal rights. This is the same in the general school context, from the nature of assessment to classroom structure, the design of a democratic form of education must incorporate broad bases of feedback from students and community members. From the natures of dress codes to the types of performances done in a year to the repertoire, this is also present in the music classroom. Often, appointed or elected councils of dedicated choir/band student leaders, and parent-led music booster organizations which guide supplemental fundraising will be deeply involved with the teacher in the year's planning. This is crucial for helping students to facilitate learning at their own pace and with their own interests, as I was able to do at the keyboard in high school.

Community and Belonging

Democratic music education fosters a sense of belonging for all in the community: students, teachers, parents, and administrators alike.

This is nowhere better exemplified than in choir programs as they can become the centerpieces of communities. In Auburn Hills, Michigan, the small city where I grew up, local businesses would often advertise choir events in the front windows of their stores and pay for advertisements in the concert programs. Then the choirs and other small ensembles would perform at Christmas tree lightings, at sports events, in local parades, and more. This is not at all unique to Auburn Hills, and I saw it replicated in small towns across Michigan when I would go on tour or clinic as a music

teacher. Music classrooms also tend to be homes for students who are considered outcasts elsewhere in the school setting: from those that do not perform well in other academic subjects to those that are seeking a social space to fit in with others who have common interests. They find that in the shared experiences of learning and discussing music, traveling for events, and the emotional release of performing pieces on stage. Performing in an ensemble is a difficult endeavor, requiring constant skill development as well as intellectual and emotional courage, but it is also a collective one. The effectiveness of a performance depends on how well each voice can recognize their own identity, how they can meld with the voices around them, and how strongly that shared purpose resonates with their audiences through song. Music classrooms can be both a place of unity for the broader community, as well as a micro-community for students within school environments, helping them to grow socially as well as academically.

Agency and Achievement

Democratic music education builds a sense of student agency and recognizes excellence and achievement in all forms.

This tenet places a responsibility on music educators in a democratic classroom to be adaptive and recognizes both multiple points of entry (within levels of ability, cultural background, and prior understanding) and multiple conceptions of success. More concretely, in my classroom this means recognizing that a student with a developed ear from singing in the church, a student that has been reading music in private instrumental lessons for years, and a student that spends hours making hip-hop beats on their computer after school, all present types of musical excellence. The way that I shape my teaching must validate their differing experiences and advance the skills necessary for our shared context as well as the skills specific to their own musical understandings. Metrics of success and achievement must be similarly tailored in this way, encouraging students to grow in our shared musical context, but also providing space for them to actively make decisions within their own. What does it mean for them to be a musician or an artist? What do they hope to create, and for whom? The act of finding these answers will open avenues for self-initiated musical endeavors to be recognized. In a band setting, this may take the shape of having recording assignments throughout the year that include parts of the ensemble repertoire as well as passages and solo sections from songs that

a student listens to outside of school or allowing students to put together a ‘garage band’ of friends with a shared musical interest for an assignment.

Open and Guided Communication

Democratic music education enables learning through open and guided communication.

Learning music is more than just skill-building; it is learning to engage with and critique music as a form of personal and cultural expression. It is building language to have informed conversations about musical elements present in the music you listen to, as well as to reflect on your own performances. I would joke with students in music theory classes that after leaving, they will never hear music the same way again. What once was merely a song now becomes a myriad of intricate decisions on melody, harmony, instrumentation, and more. In the best cases, students can understand the depth of these creative choices and apply their findings to the music they create. The classroom functions to grant the initial vocabulary and encourage them to apply it in conversations about music that holds meaning to them or to music that they wish to explore. Intellectual curiosity then opens the door to discussing the contexts, stories, and values that lie within every piece of music, which motivates even more impactful discourses.

World-Shifting Impact

Democratic music education has the ultimate end of enabling students to use music to have a meaningful impact on the world around them.

At the core of my music education philosophy is a phrase that many of my students have heard me say *ad nauseam*: “Music is Storytelling”. At its core, music is a collection of organized sound and silence that often moves people as a form of entertainment or cultural expression, but it also has immense power as a narrative tool. Music is at the core of history’s most important social movements, with powerful calls to action. Music allows people to communicate their deepest wishes across divisions of language and nationality. Through music, education is able to complete a task that is vital to the personal growth of students in a modern world, and that is to teach *empathy*. Through songs, and studying the cultures and backgrounds of the artists that create them, students are able to more critically

engage with the world around them. The unique emotional effect of music allows deeper connections to be forged between people.

In the process of teaching or running clinics with a choir or an a cappella group, after we work through the basic musicianship, I will always ask the group, “What is this about?” or “What are you trying to communicate?” Some groups want to put on a good show, others want to tell a specific story, and yet others have a more general message in mind. A strong musical background allows students to recognize and engage with these meaningful messages in the music they hear, and then share their own messages, through songwriting, performance, protest, or other artistic outlets. This is the most powerful tool that students can gain, more than any grade or test score, as it grants them the ability to move people, and through them, change the world.

APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK IN A VOCAL MUSIC EDUCATION CONTEXT

In summary, a democratic music education begins with **equitable decision-making**, incorporates **community and belonging**, recognizes student **agency and achievement**, engages them in learning through **open and guided communication**, and enables them to have **world-shifting impact** throughout their lives. To more specifically apply this framework to the vocal music classroom in which I am most familiar, I focused on three questions: “Who is singing?”, “What do we sing?”, and “Why do we sing?”

The *Who?* element incorporates the **sense of community** and **equitable decision-making** tenets. Answering this question begins with a recognition that singing is not solely an innate talent that is either possessed from birth or not, it is a skill to be built. Anyone with the desire to develop that skill or engage in the community is welcome. The process of developing the membership of the ensemble should encourage students of all backgrounds to join and contribute. This also encourages diversity and provides space for a broader population to engage in the process of music making.

The *What?* element is closely tied to this, especially when it comes to aspects of diversity, as it encourages students and educators to explore beyond the types of music traditionally included in academic settings. In addition to the genres of antiquity within the Western Classical Art Music

tradition, students and educators alike should have the ability to study contemporary popular music genres from around the world with the same rigor and depth. It facilitates student **agency** by granting them the authority to choose music to perform that aligns with their experiences and values and facilitates **open communication** by building the language to discuss the values of different musical cultures.

Finally, the *Why?* focuses on the potential **impact** of democratic music education. Not every student in a music class will go on to pursue a professional career as an artist or musician. So why then is it still critical? The rationale for teaching this subject is not solely to secure 1st Division competition ribbons and medals, to add skills to a resume, or to improve standardized test scores in other subjects. The purpose of music education in this view is one of enabling students to change the world around them through a medium that is ubiquitous throughout our society and culture. Students are able to cultivate emotional literacy, empathy, and broader social and cultural understanding. Music educators in a democratic classroom constantly push themselves and their curricula in order to provide opportunities for students to realize this potential. From writing their own music that shares their personal stories to allowing space for smaller ensembles to perform outside of the classroom, and so much more. This model is best exemplified in many arts-centric schools, some of which are detailed elsewhere in this book, but there is a broader case to be made that every K-12 music classroom can ask these questions and provide this type of impact for its students and the world around them.

LIFT EVERY VOICE

From the outside, music education tends to resemble a black box. Students and teachers go in, and then performances come out, occasionally accompanied by stories of the hard work and tight relationships that are formed in the process. But the actual mechanics of this, the long hours of rehearsing and traveling and practicing, the emotional effort put in by teachers and students alike to create works of art together, tend to be obscured to those outside of the immediate community. Music education thus tends to take a back seat as it is also not a subject that lends itself well to standardized testing, or the types of quantitative data claims about long-term earnings or other metrics of economic success that flood policy discourses. Many skills and facilities built in a music classroom fly under the radar of assessment and students may not even recognize them. But in a time

where highlighting “student voice” is paramount to education policy, music education has to be at the center, as nowhere else in the school is the promise of lifting up student voices as literally realized as in the music classroom.

I often think back on the story of my personal journey with the piano as well because it summarizes these broader lessons for democratic education. If I had been forced to take private piano lessons as a child or required by my parents to practice my instruments every single day under strict supervision and constant assessment, it likely would have pushed me away. Instead, I was given the space to expand my musicianship at my own pace and grew to invite others into the types of music that moved me the most. Now, music has become the way that I best understand and engage with the world around me.

I have used this musical language to arrange pieces about joy and sorrow, love and loss, faith and truth. I have used it to make connections with musicians and communities across the country. I have used it to find my voice as a young Black man and speak out against the systemic injustices in this world. And I have used it to teach my students to do the same.

This, the use of music learning processes to become more fully realized human beings that can shape the world around us, is democratic education in its truest form.

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Walkabout: From Disengagement to Radical Engagement

Margaret Cioffi

In 1977, Peter Copen and Eugene Lebwohl picked up the mantle of Canadian educator Maurice Gibbons, whose 1974 article, “Walkabout: Searching for the Right Passage from Childhood and School,” called for a meaningful rite of passage experience for mainstream secondary education. The need identified by Gibbons was that students were graduating high school ill prepared for the rigors of adulthood. Conversely, Australian Aboriginal adolescent males experienced a rigorous rite of passage, after which they became fully recognized, participating members of their society. The Walkabout Program was founded on the belief that Aboriginal wisdom, the challenge orientation of Kurt Hahn and the experiential imperative of John Dewey were the best means of creating a meaningful

Edits from Alex Fraiha and Ben Wild

For more information on Walkabout, and tools to implement it in your community, check out the Walkabout Learning Model at walkabout.org.

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transition from adolescence to adulthood. For thirty-seven years, Walkabout thrived as a full-day, full-year, public alternative for fifty-five high school seniors from a wide range of socioeconomic and academic backgrounds in the suburbs of Westchester County, thirty miles north of New York City (NYC).

Westchester County, like much of the United States, consists of small, standardized school districts under strict accountability measures set by the state. Unlike large urban centers such as NYC, where students can choose from various innovative options throughout the city, public high schools throughout New York's suburbs are often indiscernible from one another. Public school students in these regions may only attend the school in their municipality, leaving students who don't thrive in standardized environments without recourse. Research suggests that even students who do well academically in these environments are frequently disengaged (Pope, 2001). Despite calls for innovation of the traditional public education system in the United States, throughout Walkabout's history, the landscape of suburban public education has remained unchanged.

Walkabout is an approach to education. It's also an approach to life: challenging oneself, finding the best in oneself and others, and being of service.
(Eugene Lebowhl)

Walkabout provided a much needed intervention for high school students all of whom, regardless of their individual challenges, were disengaged from school. The danger of disengagement cannot be overemphasized. In addition to the challenges it creates for schools, resulting in behavior issues and low academic performance, it is a problem for communities as well (Reckmeyer, 2021). Disengaged students become disengaged citizens, employees and community members. The genius of Walkabout was that it took diverse groups of alienated students and created a close-knit community of engaged, confident, focused, compassionate young people eager to contribute to the world.

For most students, high school is an alienating place. The Gallup Student Poll lays this fact bare by revealing that only three out of ten seniors are engaged in their education (Calderon & Yu, 2021). This was certainly the case for me. I was discouraged, disempowered, disillusioned and disengaged. School—which was the representative of the society I was being trained to join—did not have a place for me, did not value my thoughts, interests or capacities, so what place was I to believe there would

be for me in society? By the end of my junior year, I had decided the best option was to drop out and get my GED.¹ My teachers didn't expect me to earn my high school diploma. Little did they know I'd go on to earn two post-secondary degrees after graduating from high school. They also didn't expect me to become a teacher myself. It was Walkabout that revealed this in me.

In this darkest moment of my schooling experience, a new opportunity emerged. For my senior year, I attended Walkabout and everything changed. Walkabout engaged me in authentic experiential learning through five Challenge Areas: Wilderness, Internship, Service Learning, Applied Academics and Presentations. I carefully prepared for these experiences with a community of staff and students who were committed to our individual and collective success. For the first time, I felt that I had something of value to offer. I was being called to community, to engage with my peers, my teachers and society at large to envision what was possible and to work together to make it happen. That was an incredibly powerful (and novel) message for an adolescent to receive in an educational setting.

I had honestly never recognized the power that I possessed as a social citizen until I went to Walkabout. I did not recognize that I could influence the world around me through my choices. (Nathan)

On day two, our group of thirty-five students was asked to identify what we wanted to achieve during our year together. We wrote our group goals down in a central location and made agreements with one another and the staff about the attitudes and behaviors that would best support those goals. This set the tone for the rest of the year. The same held true for our individual goals, which were constantly used as a reflection tool, to make sure we were on course and to right us when we weren't. It was never a question of staff saying, "You're not doing what you're supposed to be doing." Instead, they would ask us where we wanted to be and if our attitudes and behaviors were supporting that vision. This simple process put the responsibility for learning squarely on our shoulders.

Walkabout required radical engagement. We understood from day one that for this to work, we needed to be present throughout all aspects of

¹GED stands for General Education Development Test and may be used in the U.S. by students sixteen years or older as an alternative to high school completion.

the experience. Staff would provide us with opportunities to engage in meaningful learning, and they would also encourage us to push through each challenge, frustration and disappointment. This made us feel prepared and supported, while also held to account by our peers and community. In the Agreements made at the beginning of the year, we committed to ourselves and each other, “I am the one responsible for creating value for myself from Walkabout activities.” The goals and agreements that we made together were the first step in us exercising autonomy and agency in our lives. This was the foundation for creating within us a sense of intrinsic motivation, a necessary ingredient of engagement (“Intrinsically Motivated,” 2016). During all of our prior schooling experiences, we had been told what our goals should be and required to abide by rules we had never been consulted about.

During the second week of school, I was learning about the history and geography of the Catskill mountains and how to read a topographic map because within another week it would be my classroom. Our careful preparation for that backpacking trip revealed a pattern at Walkabout where we were taught how to do something and then given the opportunity to demonstrate that knowledge in an authentic setting. On that trip, my peers and I were responsible for one another’s survival; every decision we made determined the success or failure of the group. Here was another key ingredient of generating engagement—involve students in meaningful tasks with authentic application in the real world (Kolb, 2015).

After our trip, we entered the Service Learning Challenge Area where we were given the opportunity to make a difference in the world. During an intensive week of preparation that included interest inventories, we were instructed how to find a placement of our choosing. For the next month, I was commuting four days a week by train to a political and environmental non-profit where I did real work. I organized a divestiture campaign against U.S. banks supporting the Apartheid regime in South Africa. I identified and enlisted Middle East scholars to speak on a panel at a Gulf War Teach-In. I even started a youth activist branch of the organization so that others like me could engage in this important work. Just two months into my senior year and I had already had the most powerful learning experiences of my educational career. I had gone from a disengaged, D student, written off by my teachers, to a young adult confidently collaborating with adults who trusted and respected my capacity to impact existential social and political issues.

Then, we returned to the classroom for the Applied Academics Challenge Area. But, this was no ordinary “classroom.” We collectively engaged in developing our intellectual capacities using the Socratic method, not simply memorizing formulas, names and dates. It was instilled in me that “everyone is a teacher” and I learned as much from my peers as from my instructors. One of the scariest things I had ever done was to teach an hour-long class about strip mining at the Black Mesa on the Navajo/Hopi Indian Reservation in Arizona. But I felt inspired by my peers who had taught me and empowered by my teachers who believed I had valuable knowledge to share. The sense of accomplishment gained was something I took into future challenges and something I still think back on when I am nervous about public speaking.

I've taken an interest in my work instead of getting by as I did in the past. I engage with the content instead of blindly accepting it. Walkabout has taught me how to learn for myself and not for others. (Adam)

The Internship Challenge Area was intimidating. When writing my resume, I struggled to feel that my knowledge and skills would be of use to an actual business. The Walkabout staff helped me see my transferable and soft skills, and that simply having worked in the same industry for three years showed employers that I was committed, experienced and reliable. Being bilingual made me an asset to employers. With my newfound confidence, I landed an internship with a wildlife rehabilitator where—at seventeen—I coordinated rescue and rehabilitation efforts throughout the country, which required liaising with various state agencies! My mentor was incredibly passionate about her work and eager to guide others. It was from her example that I learned to mentor others by being patient and giving generously my time and attention.

All of my experiences at Walkabout coalesced during my Presentation, which is Walkabout’s graduation ceremony. My peers and I each gave a presentation to an audience of classmates, teachers, administrators, family and community members detailing our growth and accomplishments over the year and our plans for the future. My year at Walkabout had not only reengaged me in education but prepared me to enter adulthood and fulfill my role in society.

FROM DISENGAGEMENT TO RADICAL ENGAGEMENT, BECOMING A WALKABOUT TEACHER

The role that I chose was one of reciprocity. Walkabout had instilled in me a sense of joyful obligation to give back to the world. I could think of no better way to do that than to become a Walkabout teacher. It was my turn to be on the other side of the equation and assist students in the revelation of their purpose. Knowing how much the Walkabout staff's support had meant to me, imbued the role with a sanctity I had not anticipated. While the staff had made it look easy, knowing what kids need is different than understanding how to help them get it.

“YOUR CONTENT DOESN'T MATTER”

The most powerful thing I learned as a Walkabout teacher, though perplexing at first, was “Your content doesn't matter.” When I first heard those words, I was incredulous and thought, ‘If that's true, then what am I doing here?’ But as I entered into a co-learning relationship with my students, I understood that my job was to enliven the curiosity of students to want to understand and to develop the capacity to seek out and discover answers for themselves. Helping students realize their power in their life takes tremendous effort and endless supplies of respect, honesty, fairness and love. Many students see challenge, responsibility and goals as a burden, as evidence that they're not okay. When given the guidance, space and trust to do things for themselves and each other, the pride and confidence they feel emboldens them to take on more. Before students can meaningfully engage with content knowledge, they need to have their social and emotional needs met. They need to feel seen and they need to feel that their learning has purpose.

I learned how to be a teacher in much the same way that the kids learned their skills. I observed and assisted the staff in problem solving with students, facilitating workshops, training students for experiential components and engaging them in critical thinking. Walkabout staff facilitated the development of community through a weeklong orientation during which students and staff participated in group building activities, developed group goals, a schoolwide code of conduct and learned how to govern themselves through a process called Town Meeting. Our primary goal was to help students create a vision for themselves and to engage with

it. The goals, agreements and perspectives students built in these first days guided their journeys throughout their time at Walkabout.

“GOAL SETTING CREATES AGENCY”

Starting the year with group goals and expectations allows students to begin from a place of affirmation. When students are given the opportunity to voice what they want for themselves and their school, and they see those ideas resonating with their peers, they begin to see those goals as attainable. The collective will to get behind these ideas makes them safe to pursue and lessens the burden of responsibility while simultaneously giving each student the confidence to bear it. Participating in these workshops over the course of twenty years, I recall watching the lights go on in many students who had often been the most disaffected about school. Like myself all those years ago, a veil was being lifted, and they allowed for the possibility that they could be a part of something meaningful.

I felt that because we as a community were here for the same reasons, it was easy to succeed. That's what community means, people who come together and are willing to accomplish the same goal. (Mark)

As a Walkabout teacher, it was important to give students autonomy to maintain the goals and agreements they had established during Orientation. The Wilderness Challenge Area, the first Challenge Area of the year, proved fertile ground for students to test these principles. During preparation for this experience, my role was to impart the information needed through a series of workshops and activities and entrust the student community to lead and organize themselves. Students would have to plan what to eat, who carried vital equipment for the group and the division of tasks to be completed each day.

“EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING UNITES THEORY AND PRACTICE, INCREASES CONFIDENCE, AND CREATES SELF-RENEWING CURIOSITY”

The experiences in the wilderness were as diverse as the students themselves, the common element being that everyone came back changed and with a passionate belief in what they could accomplish individually and

collectively. The wilderness was the great equalizer; every student, no matter how accomplished or not, was challenged and had the opportunity to prove themselves. The most beautiful of these moments were not solved by myself or other staff members, but by the students themselves. Some of which were demonstrated by the students who problem solved how to forge a river that had swelled overnight, or the fast hiker who realized the group moved more efficiently when ‘slower’ hikers took the lead. There were the students who had never succeeded in classroom or extracurricular settings who went on to take charge of the group and lead them in organizing themselves at camp and on the trail. These students, used to going unnoticed or labeled as slackers, were given an opportunity to show themselves and their peers their facility as leaders.

In the Catskills [Mountains], I found tools and character I never knew I had. I came back confident and mentally strong. (Alissa)

These lessons stayed with students all year and formed a foundation from which to build future successes. When a student was afraid to cold call a service learning or internship site, they were reminded of having climbed a mountain that they had insisted was impossible. It is one thing to say to a student, “You can do more than you think you can,” and another to put them into situations where they struggle and achieve success. This helps internalize the experience, which students use to build upon. No experience in the traditional classroom, nor anything I can teach them, will ever be as powerful.

Service Learning, the next Challenge Area, gave students the opportunity to prove to themselves and others that their skills and attitudes translated to the adult world. Students are used to the world not expecting much from them. Service Learning was the first time many of our students experienced success at something. They worked alongside adults and were entrusted with tasks and projects vital to the mission and functioning of the various organizations and the populations they served.

I do have important things to say. And if I say them they will resonate inside other people. (Sean)

They volunteered in daycare centers, schools for students with special needs, women’s shelters, homeless shelters, food kitchens, animal shelters, museums, social justice organizations, outdoor education centers, nursing

homes and hospitals. They had to commute to their workplaces on time, follow through on tasks, problem solve, take initiative, collaborate and communicate with co-workers, all while keeping up with schoolwork.

Students who had formerly been labeled as, and come to believe themselves to be, “screw ups” were given the opportunity to create a different narrative. Children they worked with looked up to them, supervisors would entrust them with important projects, clients expressed gratitude for their help and compassion and they created permanent installations or improvements at cultural and civic institutions. These authentic demonstrations of accomplishment left lasting impressions on students far more meaningful than any grade on a piece of paper. The benefits of these experiences transferred into concrete skills and attitudes that they then applied to other endeavors, be they academic or experiential. Most importantly, they provided students with a keen sense of empathy and satisfaction from having given back to others.

“SUCCESS OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM REINVIGORATES LEARNING WITHIN THE CLASSROOM”

Students’ experiences striving with others to accomplish a shared goal, coupled with the agency gained through hands-on challenge, translated into beautiful expressions of support and risk taking in the classroom during the next Challenge Area, Applied Academics. Both elements were necessary. Students needed to have the confidence in themselves to share their work and ideas, but they also needed to trust that their peers would not judge them. Students took responsibility for their learning which they understood as a collective endeavor. Just as they strove together in the wilderness, helping their peers succeed in the classroom would contribute to everyone’s success. Students learned as much if not more from the peer review process as from teacher feedback.

I don't think I would have ever been able to articulate myself, but this is the year that I was finally able to say what I feel. (Lauren)

Service Learning had awakened a confidence in the students’ sense of their capacities, but it had also engaged them in a world that they wanted to learn more about. Content areas were no longer seen as disconnected from each other or the world, but tools through which to understand and impact it. Their service projects had required authentic demonstrations of

learning, which imbued classroom learning with relevance and ultimately motivated students to engage with knowledge for its own sake. A student who a month before had told me how much he hated reading and writing and was satisfied being a mediocre student showed a renewed interest in his academic classes that he credited to his time at a homeless advocacy organization. Helping people had made him feel useful and valuable, which inspired him to engage. “Imagine how much more helpful and successful I can be if I try.” Another student who hadn’t seen a place for her love of the outdoors in school, volunteered at a local nature center and threw herself into environmental science and math because she saw their applicability in her chosen context.

My attitude toward education completely changed. As soon as I felt empowered to take charge of my learning experiences and was given the opportunity to make decisions that would tangibly affect my life, I realized how much I love to learn. (Laura)

This trend continued during the Internship Challenge Area during which students would network with each other or role play interviews and phone calls. With the support of their peers and staff, students went on to have experiences that allowed them to discover and demonstrate their extraordinary potential. A student whose guidance counselor told her she would never amount to anything went on a long distance internship in Costa Rica to study exotic birds and eventually earned a PhD in Ornithology. The girl who couldn’t pick up the phone to order a pizza interned in one of the oldest publishing houses in NYC, pitching manuscript submissions to a roundtable of editors. I hate to think what would have happened to these students and all they had to offer the world had they not experienced these opportunities.

During my internship I learned that people can respect me, which I wasn’t really aware of. (Becky)

The outcomes we saw during the school year, translated far beyond our students’ time at Walkabout. A survey of alumni revealed that graduates of Walkabout attend graduate school at three times the national average, 40% go on to careers in the helping professions, 26% of which are in education. Walkabout not only provided students with an innovative pathway to graduation; it took disengaged students and turned them into lifelong

pursuers of knowledge for themselves and others. At the same time, it engaged them in ongoing service to their fellows in professions that nurture the wellbeing of others. I can think of no better demonstration of democratic schooling than alumni who commit their lives to the wellbeing of others in their communities.

“LIKE STUDENTS, TEACHERS THRIVE FROM AUTONOMY
AND AGENCY”

These systems only work when staff members have the space to become mentors, modeling the behaviors and attitudes that demonstrate their enthusiasm for and investment in each learner. Intentionally dismantling the traditional hierarchy of authority allows staff to become partners in learning with students, facilitating and guiding students toward exercising autonomy in and responsibility for their learning. Immersive scheduling allows staff to be involved in all aspects of the curriculum, in the classroom, in the wilderness, and visiting students on service learning and internships. This demonstrates a sense of shared commitment and a level of student engagement rarely seen in the traditional school system.

Walkabout functioned similarly for staff as it did for students. While we had a Team Leader, the staff shared significantly in the decisions that structured the day-to-day life of the school. We met every day to discuss student progress, the health of the community and the efficacy of policies and procedures. We underwent extensive preparation prior to each Challenge Area and spent time reflecting on and assessing what we had done and learned before moving onto the next experience. We were respected as professionals, trusted in decision making, given complete curricular freedom and encouraged to follow our interests. Experiencing that kind of autonomy, trust and love as both a student and a teacher is extraordinary.

Democracy is intended to be a social contract between the citizenry and those who represent them with responsibilities on both sides. Schools are responsible for preparing students for participation in that contract. Students are disengaged because they are not given authentic opportunities to engage in society. Walkabout students were given the chance to build and sustain community, be of service, explore their interests and find a sense of purpose. Real world, interest-driven challenge reengages

students and provides them with the skills and attitudes required to discover and fulfill their role in society.

Participation in civic society is an obligation that all members of a democracy share; one that is vital to its survival. Schools that create tangible conditions of democratic life in the daily lives of students and staff inevitably produce engaged citizens. Young people have the capacity to do extraordinary things if the adults around them believe in, trust and provide opportunities for them to do so.

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Coco: A Nomad Learning Experience for Digital Inclusion in the Peruvian Amazon

Luis Miguel Hadzich Girola

In this chapter, I want to present Coco, a proposal for a different way of interacting with education, in the context of Ashaninka communities, but leveraging the potential of technology and design to foster inclusion. What I propose is still in an early design stage, but it aims to take shape as a democratic learning environment capable of overcoming many of their struggles in a way that truly empowers indigenous youth and connects them to the digital-global culture. Coco is a learning experience in the making that aims to improve Ashaninka's living conditions and amplify their design skills, but based on their own terms, resources, culture and talent.

I hope to expand on the nuances of this vision and transport the reader into the near future to discover, imagine and feel how Coco plans to tackle challenges. First, I will describe the educational context in Peru, highlighting the challenges of rural education, the limits of interculturality and the opportunity Coco seeks to pursue. Then, I will explain how the Coco experience works. We will explore its nomadic identity, its

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adaptive spaces and its portable infrastructure. Next, we will understand how learning, growth and assessment happen from the perspective of the learner and how it all responds and adapts to the community's needs and context. Finally, we will highlight the relationship between culture, technology and inclusion and how they act as synergic catalysts to enable Coco to fulfill its democratic vision.

EDUCATION IN PERU AND THE AMAZON REGION

Peru's geographic diversity ranges from beaches to deserts, highlands, valleys and rainforests. Unfortunately, that diversity is also the main barrier for many public schools to have access to physical and digital infrastructure. This gap is further widened when you delve into the depths of the Peruvian Amazonia and look closer at schools in indigenous territories, especially those which are further apart and are only accessible by river. There, native communities depend mainly on public funds to access education, teachers and pedagogical material, which are tied to each local government's agenda, budget and teaching incentives.

In 2016, the Peruvian government deployed legislation to provide intercultural and bilingual primary education to these communities in order to adapt education to their cultural context. This mostly meant deploying strategies to gradually transition from their native language to Spanish and adapting textbooks with local examples (e.g. boats instead of cars), to help them better understand the content they are taught in school. And, while the idea looks promising, the focus is mainly on bilingual education, with fewer efforts to explore interculturality as a bidirectional cultural exchange to improve learning and teaching.

For many indigenous communities, the way school works does not take into account their traditional ways of learning and transferring knowledge. Rote learning and memorizing are still the default and students and teachers have little agency to define learning in their own terms. Moreover, what is taught to them fails to show value within their context. School is perceived as a formal and structured activity, alien to their cultural context, that happens within a concrete box in the middle of the Amazon rainforest. For some families it's not even about learning at all, it's just a place where their kids get one free meal a day.

During my experience as a designer working with native Ashaninka¹ communities, I have seen how this type of education has failed to empower them consistently. I've witnessed how they have been pushed to abandon their communities in search of better opportunities. In order to succeed, members of the Ashaninka community sometimes had to reshape their identity according to Western cultural standards. But at the same time, I've also noticed the possibilities technology has brought to improve their learning experiences.

Contrary to what many may believe, technology is not completely alien to indigenous communities. The arrival of mobile networks has brought new possibilities for self-learning, and many indigenous young people have started to explore the potential of the digital world, mainly through the use of social networks like YouTube and Facebook. I see this as a huge opportunity. Still, there are many barriers to overcome, such as language, access to technological infrastructure and lack of digital literacy. The latter makes the Ashaninkas vulnerable to fake information and often tends to limit their interaction with the global communities as merely passive consumers. So far, technology has just gained them access to another world that consistently fails to include them.

Coco's goal is to allow the Ashaninkas in the Amazon region to experiment and learn to use new technologies to improve their communities while also becoming part of a wider and global community. We, at Coco, see global digital culture as an opportunity to expand and design their own tools to fulfill their needs, reflecting their identity. We want them to start seeing education as a lifelong journey that can help their families overcome everyday issues, not only outside their community but also within, and slowly show that learning can also take place in creative open environments that directly benefit their surroundings.

The educational purpose of Coco is oriented toward building democratic citizenship by providing them with opportunities to participate and be active agents of change in their communities. Coco defines itself as a democratic school because it aims to create educational experiences that focus on reverting structural inequities by "viewing such conditions as challenges to be dealt with, not excuses for inaction" (Apple

¹The Ashaninka represent the demographically largest indigenous or Amazon native group in Peru, according to the Peruvian Ministry of Culture. They are mainly established in the eastern tropical jungle of Peru, around the regions of Junín, Ucayali, Pasco, Cusco, Huánuco and Ayacucho.

& Beane, 1995). It is also democratic because it does not “claim sole ownership of possible knowledge and meaning” (ibid.) and instead plans to invite and encourage kids from indigenous communities to understand their own context, reflect critically and construct their own knowledge through their engagement in problem-solving. It aims to give them a voice but also to make them accountable for the role they choose to take in their community.

COCO: A NOMAD LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Coco is an after-school program that is complementary to public schooling in rural Ashaninka communities in Peruvian Amazonia. Coco’s mission is to become a nomadic workshop that empowers indigenous youth to take advantage of the digital-global culture and accompanies them to assert their creative confidence by transforming their communities through design.

Coco travels by river to reach communities, bringing them access to technologies and a professional teaching team. It spends one week in each community visiting a total of three communities a month. The remaining week is for teachers to rest and plan. The same communities are visited each month for the whole academic year, meaning that each community is visited a total of twelve weeks in a year. The teaching team is composed of a highly experienced small group of carefully selected local and national teachers.

The nomadic approach is intended to avoid potential barriers that families perceive in sending their kids to a school. These barriers might be money, time, location, mistrust or lack of awareness. The idea of having a school that “goes to the student” is to assume those costs and provide the families with low-risk opportunities to engage, meet and try first-hand how a different learning environment operates and generates value within their context.

Interestingly, the “nomadic” concept is not new for these communities. It intentionally builds upon the Ministry of Education’s successful and valued initiative of “pedagogical companions”, which consists of sending highly experienced teachers to visit several communities in a designated territory. These visits happen regularly, with the purpose of training and assisting rural teachers in their own context.

As a way of reversing the structural inequities around access to digital culture, we try to level the playing field. Coco starts by placing

most of the risk of investment on the institution itself and lowering the risk on the families and community. This is achieved by assuming the responsibility of bringing the digital infrastructure to them instead of otherwise, establishing symbolic tuition according to their possibilities and practically demanding no academic requirements to enroll.

We know access to technology is limited, so we bring them the tech. We bring laptops, cameras and other design tools they can experiment with, but also help them figure them out. Where there is a lack of connectivity, we still bring the knowledge to them, offline. Wikipedia on a local hard drive and laptops with pre-installed open-source software ready for offline use, such as Scratch and Linux. We believe digital culture can be experienced beyond the online world, so we go the extra mile to close the gap.

To achieve this, Coco's infrastructure is designed to operate like a circus or a theater company (see Image 26.1). It travels with portable equipment and furniture, as well as a tent to serve as a temporary and

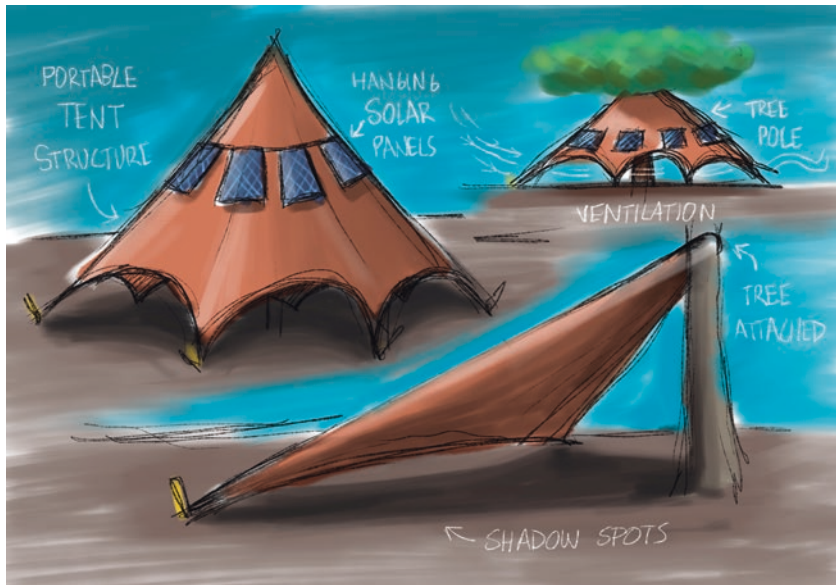


Image 26.1 Coco's tent design

flexible learning space that adapts to diverse climates and difficult and uneven terrains.

The self-sustainable nomad workshop is equipped with portable tools and technology that enables students to experiment, design and create physical tools, plans and strategies to tackle challenges in their community. Every piece of equipment is portable, and surfaces are just platforms waiting to be given meaning by the student's creativity.

Coco is a responsive learning environment that adapts to the needs of the community, the students and the school (see Image 26.2). Kids could be easily cooking with a laptop next to the stove or reading on the mat or hammocks around the tent (see Image 26.3). Spaces are not fixed; they are suggestions, triggers and invitations to be tinkered with by the students.

With this, Coco wants to expand the concept of “learning spaces” and make it permeate into the community's public and private environment. By changing locations on every visit, we want to reinforce that

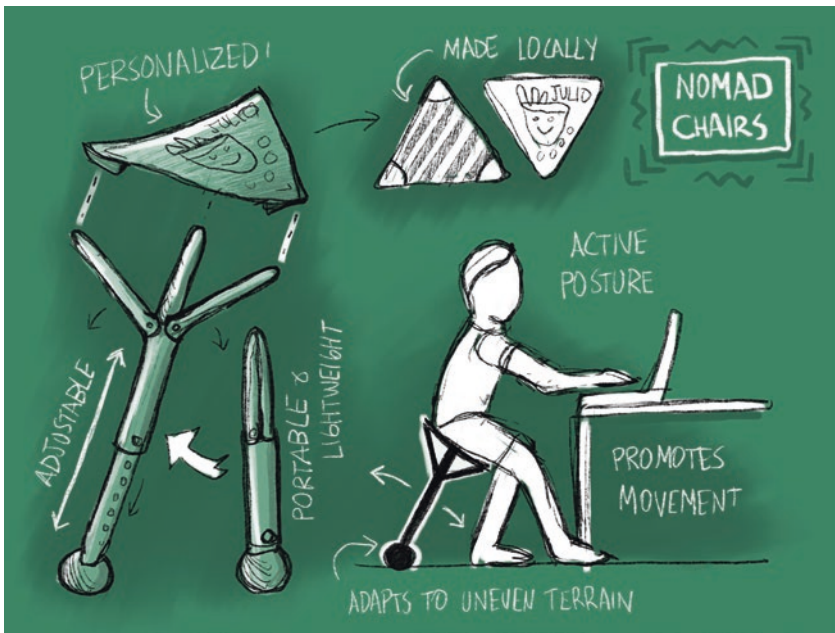


Image 26.2 Coco's responsive design



Image 26.3 The interior of the tent

learning can happen anywhere and anytime, not just in a concrete block, presenting an alternative learning experience that is not tied to limited space and time.

LEARNING, GROWTH AND COMMUNITY

Youngsters learn something different and meaningful to them every week. First, the teaching team works with the students and the community to identify a design challenge that the students can solve by themselves with local resources and guidance from the team. From Monday to Sunday, the teaching team helps the teenagers identify a problem, research, design, prototype and test their solutions within their community.

While the challenges are defined by the teaching team, they are heavily influenced by the community and students, while sensible to current local issues that may arise. The teaching team acts as guides that scaffold the student's learnings and digital skills but are guided by the interests and the curiosity of students. The design challenges provide the

necessary structure but let kids have agency in choosing how they focus their projects. For example, if the challenge of the week is “nutrition”, kids can choose to develop a new dish and explore the art of cooking, curate a cooking book to record traditional recipes, design and build a new eating instrument or think of a nutritional campaign and design posters to communicate a message.

The inside of the tent will be constantly transforming to amplify each learning stage. It might start empty and quiet during the research phase, just to become noisy, chaotic and crowded during the prototyping phase. By the end of the week, the students showcase their solutions to the community through a public exposition and a group reflection. With their final presentation, the tent will transform into a beautiful display of their learnings, an ephemeral museum that portrays the week’s effort and invites the community to peek, interact and enjoy this fleeting space.

All the knowledge created and the products built stay within and for the community, we just provide the space for inspiration, learning and creation. Students can use their designs to transform their public spaces, use their own language to share their knowledge, manufacture products to improve community activities or even create learning experiences to share with other members of their community.

Through design, students will be able to assert their creative confidence. By following the human-centered design process, students will develop a research-oriented mindset to identify problems in their community. They will awaken their creativity and reimagine their communities by questioning the status quo. Ultimately, they will learn by doing, learning from their mistakes and reflecting on their own practice using an Agile approach. Developing a designer mindset will allow them to use technology in a way that is relevant to their community and reflects their identity and culture.

Coco’s objective is not to assess their students on content-specific issues, but rather to help them grow and develop life-worthy skills and habits. For this reason, Coco’s learning experience is strategically designed to be a predictable, yet flexible, learning schedule. To achieve this, we use a goal-oriented rubric that helps teachers, students and the community to evaluate and measure the progress of each competency. By making the long-term learning goals visible through a rubric, students will be able to see the full growth journey and the criteria required to achieve each checkpoint. The five aspects we assess are digital literacy, creative

confidence, effective communication, critical thinking and interpersonal skills.

Each student will receive at the end of each week a visual feedback document, accompanied by actionable suggestions on how to move on to the next tier. For the teaching team, it provides a measurement of the student's growth in every category, which allows the teaching team to personalize the learning experience. Parents will be able to visually grasp the growth of their kids by comparing their feedback document each month, but we hope this can also be easily observed by their improvement in interacting with technology in their everyday lives.

During their stay, teachers are required to respect the community's cultural norms and be respectful of their beliefs. For this, it is crucial to be respectful of their traditions, to participate in communal activities before and after school time and to develop close friendships with the kids and their families. Introductory readings and workshops will be provided so they can get familiar with and ask questions in a safe space. After that, each teacher will be assigned a person from the community to act as an informal guide, teacher and advisor to help them learn cultural norms and practice their informal interactions. This is core to the school, whose aim is to blur the borderline between school and community. Ultimately, this school is not meant to shape communities, communities are meant to shape this school.

We also understand that building a strong sense of community also relies on drawing knowledge from elders and intergenerational groups. Historically, indigenous communities tend to be hesitant to share their knowledge with outsiders, as a result of past experiences involving labor abuse, cultural appropriation and environmental exploitation. This means that to open the possibility of students sharing digital content that draws from their "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992) and sharing it with the global community, the community needs to trust the Coco staff. This will require us to develop a close relationship with the community and also develop guidelines and mechanisms that guarantee the protection of their knowledge and resources. While my previous experience working with them is a valuable asset toward tightening that relationship, it is just a head-start. We will also seek legal guidance to make sure we are protecting their interests and knowledge in the best way possible in the digital realm.

Teachers are encouraged to try new ways of teaching, different mechanisms to foster values and different strategies to connect with

students and families. By participating in community events during the week, being in constant communication with leaders and key stakeholders, and getting to know families and students, the teaching team can find new ways to adapt, respond and collaborate with the needs of the community. The “how” is flexible to experimentation, but to change the “why”, the school requires them to provide evidence (research, testimonies, metrics, etc.).

Ultimately, *Coco*, as a learning experience, wants to become a statement that education can look and feel different from what we expect it to be. A reminder that learning is a constant process that requires us to adapt to the environment’s needs. An example of how our surroundings influence how we present ourselves. A witness of how technology and nature can coexist and complement each other. A political statement about the power of design and technology to make education more equitable and democratic.

INTERCULTURAL DIGITAL INCLUSION

Coco sees learning as an intercultural exchange, and interculturality, as we see it, should work as a two-way street. This means not only giving them tools to adapt and seize the opportunities that a globalized culture brings, but also helping them find ways to express their culture, share their funds of knowledge and enrich our globalized culture with their values.

By tapping into the pool of global knowledge through digital tools, students will be able to improve their lives within the community or access better jobs in the city if they choose to leave. We achieve this by allowing them to solve real-world problems while also learning to be part of a wider global and digital community (makers, designers, advocates, etc.). Also, by building digital literacy skills to discern fact from opinion, they can decide their own “truth” and develop critical thinking that allows them to liberate and decolonize the knowledge they have access to. The latter could mean improving their political presence in the digital world, expanding the available digital content in their native language, connecting several grassroots organizations to fight for indigenous rights or improving their living conditions (food, production, housing, etc.).

Overall, *Coco* is proud to define itself as an anti-colonial learning environment that respects the cultural heritage, avoids reproducing

systemic oppression and provides access to global knowledge without putting those traditions at risk. Coco will also make sure that there is a strong gender equity focus and will make sure that the digital culture that develops in Ashaninka learning spaces elevates females as leaders while preparing them to actively take roles in their community. We will make sure that these skills, as well as the new digital skills they acquire, are not perceived as gender-specific or respond to previous gender stereotypes. The design mindset and the digital-global culture should be perceived, leveraged and represented (within the community and outside it) by everyone.

We envision our students actively transforming their community and making the most out of the digital world without having to leave home. Young Ashaninkas equipped to navigate within a modern globalized context and acting as a link to connect their communities to these global scenarios. Capable of using technology to positively transform their surroundings and become change agents who see social problems as opportunities for learning rather than barriers, expanding their role of digital consumers and evolving into digital creators and designers.

Coco envisions its students as the future democratic leaders of their communities. They are critical thinkers, tech-savvy designers and avid lifelong learners that embody the values of their cultural identity. They are leaders, makers and thinkers able to navigate within globalized contexts to seize opportunities that empower and enable them. They value their cultural heritage; they are innovators, creative makers and social advocates. They are the living image that digital inclusion can come without sacrificing identity. They adapt to the world, but can also make the world adapt to them.

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The Seychelles National Youth Service (NYS): Fragments, Thoughts and Reflections on an Experiment in Democratic Education

Simon Murray

Ensemble nou pou lutte contre l'injustice
NYS pas tolere parazit
Discipline pou toujours
Hypocrite nou pas tolere
NYS leaders of tomorrow
—Some NYS slogans in Kreol and English

In my context this is the story of an attempt to create a radical system of secondary education in Seychelles based on principles of participatory

Note: When working for the NYS in 1981, the author was then called Simon Henderson. He took on the surname Murray in 1990 when he became a professional actor. It has stayed with him in all his academic and writing work.

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Image 27.1 Work and Health project, NYS. (Image: Simon Murray (Henderson) 1981)

democracy and a heuristic pedagogy whereby mental and manual learning—head and hand—were equally valorized and practiced. In the late autumn of 1980 I was interviewed—more of a free-ranging conversation really—in a London café by Olivier Le Brun for an as-yet-undefined post within the Seychelles National Youth Service (NYS) and I began work as ‘advisor’ in January 1981. As I shall explain in more detail throughout this chapter the NYS was a state-financed and organized program of education open to all fifteen- to seventeen-year-old young people across the country (Image 27.1: Simon Henderson, 1981). This short chapter attempts to identify the principles and practices that guided the NYS in its very early years of imagining and planning. This is a historical ‘snapshot’—some fragments of time—rather than an overarching account covering the seventeen years of the NYS’ existence. I am writing and reflecting on my own lived experience of the NYS while drawing upon the stories of other key players in the project during its development and early years of existence.

SEYCHELLES: POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Republic of Seychelles is an archipelago of 115 islands in the Indian Ocean, some 2000 kilometers off the East African coast and over 3000 from Sri Lanka. Its largest island is Mahé, where most of the population (98,400) live and where the first NYS village was established at Port Launay in 1980. Seychelles bears the yoke of double colonization, first settled by the French in 1770 and then transferred to the British in 1814. Culturally, socially and politically, Seychelles remains a complex ethnic weave of African, Asian and European influences. The country gained independence in 1976 and for a year was led by wealthy ‘playboy’ businessman, James Mancham, until he was deposed by France-Albert René, leader of the Seychelles People’s Progressive Front. In conjunction with other key players, it was René and his government that imagined the NYS and gave birth to the project in 1980.

THE NYS: SEEDS, HOPES, PLANS AND PRACTICES

From 1977 René’s government was committed to transforming the country’s key social and economic institutions with a view to removing, or severely modulating, the inequalities and oppressions—class, gender, age, education, skin color and urban/rural poverty—which had become inherent under colonial rule. For René, such a huge investment (financially and politically) in a radical education system accompanied other changes in the social, environmental and economic fabric of the country: welfare and health systems, regulatory structures around the development of tourism in ecologically and environmentally prized areas, expansion of and support for the fishing industry and infrastructural developments in and between the islands. One sensed then—and indeed now—that the NYS was the ‘jewel in the crown’ of these radical policies, partly for international prestige, but more importantly, perhaps, a recognition that profound social change had to be a middle and long-term project beginning with the country’s youth and their thinking, dispositions, attitudes and behaviors.

The journey, of course, was never straightforward. From the beginning, there were countervailing anti-democratic forces which included privileged social groups who wanted to maintain a conventionally limited and elitist educational system. In this context, ‘privilege’ was rooted and performed through class, gender and the pernicious complexities of color and race. In addition, many parents were concerned about the residential

nature of the NYS project which they feared would remove their daughters from domestic tasks at home and loosen control over their sexual behavior. When the NYS was officially launched, the compulsory nature of the project provoked opposition in many quarters as it was perceived as a kind of military service. It was in the context of these force fields that the government applied to UNESCO for technical aid and between August 1979 and May 1980 UNESCO consultant, Olivier Le Brun, started work with René, undertaking practical research on how these transformations could be thought of and made concrete. In particular, his brief was to consider how the NYS might contribute to this transformation process. Le Brun was also a member of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at Sussex University (UK) and with key researcher, Robin Murray, they together composed and wrote what was to become the defining map for the development of the NYS. For René and his government to draw upon the support of European minds in the form of Le Brun, Murray and occasionally other members of the IDS team at Sussex raises interesting questions of why a country having thrown off the yoke of colonialism should turn back to the West/Global North for advice and radical thinking in the fields of education and youth development. There are doubtless various answers to this question, but one lay in the reputation and respect with which Le Brun, Murray and the IDS were held for progressive and radical thinking, far removed perhaps from the typical United Nations consultants with dispositions informed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Nonetheless, when a significant influx of European and North American teachers were later recruited—with differing expectations and political thinking—the question reappeared and remained a very pertinent one.

Le Brun and Murray's 'map' entitled *The Seychelles National Youth Service: The Seed of a New Society* (henceforth *The Seed*) was never an absolute blueprint but attempted to blend creative debate with concrete proposals for the curriculum and the structure(s) of village life for the first intake of pupils (800+) who would be living on the Port Launay site from February 1981. *The Seed* ran to seventy-two pages with the first twenty-one devoted to an economic, political and cultural analysis of Seychelles and the remainder, a wide-ranging but detailed set of proposals, for the lived reality of the NYS and Seychellois education as a whole. During his consultancy period, and the writing of *The Seed* with Murray, Le Brun engaged in many preparatory meetings and reflection with the embryonic NYS Advisory Board (chaired by President René). Apart from its internal

purpose and structure, the broader success of the NYS was also to depend on changes to the country's overall education system, and to this end the two existing elite high schools—Seychelles College and Regina Mundi—were to be phased out. With the blessing of René, a para-military structure and ethos for the NYS (common in a number of newly independent ex-colonies in Africa) were officially rejected in favor of one which articulated the pedagogical principles identified in this chapter. There were, however, forces within the government orientated toward a more para-military (and disciplinary) pedagogy, but for the early years, at least, both the author and other players cited in this chapter felt that these influences were largely in a minority. Further research might reveal the different consequences and behaviors endowed by the NYS project compared to other newly independent countries following basic literacy and numeracy programs alongside and within the training of young political cadres for national (or nationalist) leadership.

From the outset, the aims and purpose of the NYS were ambitious and complex. Framing the whole project was the unequivocal political mission to transform the country into a socialist society and, within this, young people were to have an explicit and leading role. However, the NYS—note the implications of the word ‘service’ in the name—was never to have been a didactic and top-down model of education where students (fifteen to seventeen years) would be drilled into passive obedience to an abstract or dogmatic set of principles. The NYS was to be a prefigurative form for a new society of equal and democratic relationships across every sphere of social life—in work, in the domestic domain, in learning, in relationships and in leisure. In *The Seed* Le Brun and Murray propose that the project would be based in a village or camp ‘where the children would have the opportunity to discover new ways of learning, working and playing together’ (Le Brun & Murray, 1980, p. 20).

THE NYS: THE GROWTH OF A PRACTICE

In August and September 1980, a three-week pilot project—or ‘experimental holiday camp’—tested out some of the precepts, ideas and practices with almost 500 young Seychellois volunteers and undertook initial training with older animateurs who had already been selected to work on the Port Launay site when it opened its gates to 820 young people the following February. Le Brun and Murray’s *The Seed* framed the discourses, conversations and practical activities of the event. Without cost to the

participants, each week offered a range of ‘prefigurative’ activities for the young people which included the building of a miniature model village, production of three issues of an embryonic NYS newspaper (*Vilaz Lazenes*) led by Frances Murray and rehearsals for a village ‘parliament’ which might function on a regular basis when the whole village was properly up and running. Le Brun captures the spirit of the event like this:

The camp was a spectacular major “happening”. A line of photographers were to be seen pointing their cameras at comrades who were filming a group staging a play about pollution control, egged on by an orchestra which was also accompanying a folk group that performed dancing games in which nearly everyone joined ... before plunging into the sea, which was thronged with young explorers on yachts. ... This experimental camp planted the roots of the democratic organizing spirit on which the NYS prided itself. (Le Brun, 2020)

The NYS formally opened six months later—by this time it was to be a voluntary project for potential students—with an eclectic band of teachers who had been recruited from Europe (UK and Belgium), Sri Lanka, Guinea-Conakry, Mauritius, Canada (largely from French-speaking Quebec) and, of course, Seychelles itself. As noted above, this disparate group came inevitably with different levels of training, experience and commitment to the Socialist ideals of the NYS and its heuristic approaches to learning and teaching. From my memory and perspective, it would be overly simplistic to calibrate these attitudes according to the teachers’ countries of origin. At the time—and in hindsight—these differing perspectives (sometimes pleasingly disparate, sometimes negative and dysfunctional, occasionally toxic) might have been productively resolved if there had been more preparation, training and induction time for the teachers before they became immersed in their daily duties. Relatedly, there were inevitable tensions from time to time between the Murray-Le Brun participatory democratic ethos and the children’s own aspirations on the one hand and the government’s Socialist trajectory on the other. Growing and practicing the seeds of a new society was never going to be uncomplicated or straightforward!

The boys and girls were housed in eighteen separate but paired ‘clusters’ (forty-eight in each) (Image 27.2: Olivier Le Brun, 1981), while classroom teaching was to take place in a study center with sixteen classrooms. The curriculum was to be delivered through a modular system of



Image 27.2 Discussing a project in a cluster, Port Launay NYS Village. (Image: Olivier Le Brun, 1981)

courses known as ‘blocks’, each one blending education with production and theory with practice. Alongside these seven ‘blocks’—Health, Animal Husbandry, Fishing, Culture, Crops, Information and Construction/Technology (Image 27.3: Hubert Murray, 1981)—Maths, English and French were taught as core curriculum. Le Brun provides some examples of how theory was integrated into practice:

In physics, optics was taught from photography, and acoustics in the context of the radio station; in biology, theoretical knowledge was built up through the volunteers’ experience of agricultural activities (including animal husbandry and fishing) and of cooking and healthcare practice. (Le Brun, 2020)

It seems important at this juncture to reiterate that the ambitious goal of the NYS was to remove hierarchies of knowledge and learning, to challenge fundamentally the belief that some children only need technical/vocational education while others deserve more exalted and valorized



Image 27.3 A work crew of students and animateurs (youth leaders) prepare to raise a roof truss in a classroom. (Image: Hubert Murray, 1981)

‘academic’ modes of learning. This was to be a pedagogic model that defied the notion that high-quality education could only be delivered through cognitive modes of learning and teaching; rather by melding head and hand, the NYS would enable all students to celebrate and achieve their full potential in either mental or manual labor—or both. Furthermore, the NYS was to confront the very binary that divides effective teaching and learning between thinking and doing. To put it rather crudely, you think more creatively and expansively through a combination of thought and action, and your actions will always be more productive when they are combined with reflection, reasoning and cognition.

Phil Sutcliffe, a journalist from Newcastle upon Tyne, worked with students in the Information Block to produce several editions of a village newspaper every year. The whole process was entirely democratic, as Sutcliffe wryly recalls:

Some wonderful drawings and portraits were made and all the potential articles (by the students) were read out loud to the whole gathering.

Nothing was rejected and there was no criticism. It was not a very discriminating democracy! (Sutcliffe, 2020)

Apart from the challenges of productively integrating theory and practice in or around the classroom, the teachers—individually and collectively—were charged with developing modes of assessment and discipline which somehow articulated the utopian ethos of a democratic and Socialist system of education. No small task under any circumstances and one that often generated differing perspectives and solutions. An overriding challenge for all the teachers was how to encourage and enable the students to become active agents in their own learning rather than passive recipients of given information and knowledge. Teachers, Jay Derrick and Gay Lee, drew upon the writings of Paulo Freire and his critique of what he aptly called the ‘banking’ system of education. Freire writes:

Implicit in the banking concept is the assumption of a dichotomy between human beings and the world: a person is merely in the world, not with the world or with others; the individual is a spectator, not re-creator. (Freire, 1975, p. 49)

Of course, those teachers who were disposed to follow Freire-type pedagogies often ran up against pressures of time, space and the sheer numbers of young people in any one class. Moreover, the NYS was taking in students much habituated to the ‘banking’ model upon which their primary education had been based.

Reflecting on the first three years of the NYS I recall a prevailing sense of an energetic laboratory—or melting pot—of ideas, experimentation, frustrations, disagreements and multiple small achievements. In the thick of it, both students and their teachers were endeavoring to invent new ways of learning to be in the world, of relating to each other and of making discoveries about themselves and the material circumstances in which they existed. In retrospect, we were racing to achieve many of the democratic and egalitarian practices outlined by Le Brun and Murray in *The Seed*. Our sights were set high, but, of course, many of us were naive in our expectations as to what could be achieved in a relatively short period of time. Nonetheless, in the context of internal and external challenges—the attempted coup in 1981, for example—achievements in relation to the NYS’ foundational aims were considerable. Perhaps the biggest challenge was to help grow that sense of individual and collective self-confidence

among the students—a precondition for genuine agency and democratic control of daily life. Here, it was hoped, would be behaviors, pedagogies and attitudes in stark contrast to the largely didactic, ‘banking’ system of education, so excoriated by Paulo Freire: teaching to be found in both Seychellois primary education and the two existing sixth-form institutions, Regina Mundi and Seychelles College.

Forty-two years on from Le Brun and Murray’s map and the practices, ethos and playful dispositions advanced in their writing and—in the early years at least—by René’s government I particularly discern an accent on ‘discovery’, ‘playing’ and ‘together’ (Image 27.4: Olivier Le Brun, 1981). Pedagogically and politically, each of these terms offers a glimpse of the force fields which might drive and shape the emerging NYS. The pedagogy was to be resolutely heuristic—learning through doing: thinking and reflection always in active conversation with practice, whether this be in animal husbandry, making culture, producing a village newspaper, designing and building spaces or in farming. Within their time at the NYS,



Image 27.4 Friendship at the end of the first year, Port Launay NYS Village. (Image: Olivier Le Brun, 1981)

students were to begin living democratic and imaginatively respectful lives which would become the practices—tools for living—that they would carry into adult life and the world beyond the NYS village. Even from this brief overview, it is clear that for the NYS project, democracy and democratic processes were never simply procedural matters of electing student representatives onto various committees at different levels of village life. Such structures would be put into place, but the democratic heft was to be embedded in daily practice, to run across, down and through every aspect of the student experience—a rooted behavioral disposition to govern human relationships: ‘new ways of learning, working and playing together’ (ibid.).

I end with the reflections of teacher and trained nurse, Gay Lee, who worked in the Health Block, particularly around issues of sex education:

I saw success in things like the almost complete absence of teenage pregnancies and the positive changes in the relationships between the girls and the boys. I remember seeing a male student who right at the end of his NYS time had to go straight home to look after his mother who had become very ill. He and the rest of the family and neighborhood were really surprised and pleased that he could do the ‘female’ work of caring, housework and cooking. (Lee, 2020)

Lee ended a conversation with me in 2020 with remarks which suggest that Le Brun and Murray’s utopian imaginings for the NYS were not entirely misplaced:

I felt that NYS was a great social leveller—sons and daughters of the ministers mingling with the very poorest students. I think most people from whatever background were fairly happy there. The very poor students I think had it best. (Lee, 2020)

POSTSCRIPT

It is beyond the experience and knowledge of the author to offer a continuing account of the NYS from the mid-1980s into the 1990s. Clearly there were policy divisions within the government as to the direction the NYS should take and in 1998 it ended after seventeen years of operation. However, as Le Brun notes:

A second youth village was opened in February 1982 at Cape Ternay, also on the island of Mahé, and a third on the island of Sainte Anne. The three villages were to bring together almost all young people aged fifteen to seventeen. Together with the staff, they represented ten percent of the country's working-age population between fifteen and sixty-four. (Le Brun, 2020)

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Self-authorship and Co-authorship: Democratic Education in Sitka, Alaska

Grace Greenwald

Outer Coast is a new postsecondary institution in Sitka, Alaska,¹ that offers an education founded on the three pillars of academics, service and labor, and self-governance.²

In academics, students attend college-level seminars and earn college credit for their work; in service and labor, students maintain consequential service partnerships with community organizations and carry out the

¹ Sitka, Alaska, is a rural island community of 9000 people in Southeast Alaska. Nowhere are the challenges of access and persistence in higher education more pronounced than in Alaska, which ranks 49th in the US in college graduation rate and 50th in low-income college participation. Alaska Native students enroll in and graduate from college at half the rate of their white Alaskan peers (Hanson & Pierson, 2016).

² Outer Coast is on *Lingít Aaní*, the unceded land of the Tlingit people, and on the land of the Kiks.ádi Clan. We are grateful to the Kiks.ádi for having welcomed us and our students to do the work of Outer Coast on this land—a welcome which has been renewed at the beginning of each semester at a convocation ceremony.

G. Greenwald (✉)
Outer Coast, Sitka, AK, USA

essential labor of the campus for communal living; in self-governance, students legislate student life and shape core aspects of the program through autonomous Student Body meetings.

Outer Coast is currently pursuing accreditation through a branch campus stewardship relationship with the University of Alaska Southeast and hopes to open the doors to a two-year liberal arts college in the fall 2024. As we work toward opening college proper, Outer Coast currently offers two programs: a year-long course of postsecondary study for high school graduates and a four-week summer seminar for high school students.

Outer Coast was founded in 2014 when Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins (a born-and-raised Sitkan and former Alaska State Representative) began exploring the idea of starting a college in Sitka—specifically, a college that would anchor Sitka’s historic Sheldon Jackson Campus³—and created a blueprint for Outer Coast’s three-pillared educational model inspired by Deep Springs College.⁴

I joined the Outer Coast team in the fall 2019, writing grants to build a financial runway to grow toward the college and working in student support. After years of thought work and relationship-building in Sitka (as well as two summer seminars to test and hone the model), I joined the team as they were about to cross an important Rubicon by expanding into a year-long program—an opportunity for questions of self-governance, communal living, and organizational democratic process to be pressure-tested at the nine-month scale with college-aged students for the first time.

Outer Coast emphasizes reaching students from across Alaska, particularly Alaska Natives and rural Alaskans, as well as other students from backgrounds underrepresented and underserved in American higher education. Operating on a personalized pay-as-you-can model, Outer Coast supports 100% of financial need and cost is never a barrier to attendance for students.⁵

Relationship to place is a lifetime project for Outer Coast. And it is our responsibility as a school situated on the Sheldon Jackson Campus to

³The campus was once home to Sheldon Jackson College, Alaska’s oldest institution of higher education until it was closed abruptly in 2007. Outer Coast College will be the first return of academic-year programming to the campus.

⁴<https://www.deepsprings.edu/>

⁵Read more at <https://outercoast.org/-overview/cost-affordability/>

stand for a model of education that honors and centers Indigenous culture, language, and ways of knowing.⁶

Core faculty are currently building out a place-based general education curriculum to anchor the college academic pillar by these values.⁷ Dean Dr. Matthew Spellberg describes a vision of a course of study that honors “*Lingít Aaní*, the home of the Tlingit people, its ecology, its biology, its culture, and, crucially, its Indigenous language, which gives voice to the values, people, and land around us. [...] We aspire to build an institution that encompasses both the library and the field. We seek to bridge Western and Indigenous approaches to knowledge and to create a place where different modes of thinking can meet each other eye-to-eye, with mutual respect. [...] Our hope is that students come to Outer Coast to receive an education in a deep tradition, one connected to the land, to history, to ideas of reciprocity and community, to direct work with others, and to longstanding, ever-changing modes of inquiry, whether those be empirical and scientific, or philosophical and spiritual.”⁸

INTRODUCTION

At Outer Coast, storytelling and self-governance are two tools for student authorship—first of their individual narratives and later, as a collective Student Body, to act as the authors of the Outer Coast institution and write what it becomes in the landscape of higher education.

⁶The history of the Sheldon Jackson Campus is complex and can be explored through the Voices of Sheldon Jackson Archive (<https://www.sjvoices.org>). As Matthew Spellberg writes in an unpublished essay he shared with me, “The campus once housed the Sitka Industrial Training School, associated with the missionary Sheldon Jackson, that was part of the Indian Boarding School movement. It was an epicenter of the project to destroy Native languages and cultures in Alaska. In more recent times, the Sitka Industrial School was the seedbed for the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood, two legendary civil rights organizations that helped secure the vote for Alaska Natives. In the 1960s and 70s, the campus hosted a revitalization of Tlingit language, art, and scholarship.”

⁷Outer Coast’s curricular offerings to date have included Indigenous Studies (“learning the Tlingit language, learning the history of colonialism and resistance to it, and studying questions about kinship and community from philosophy and anthropology”), place-based sciences (“courses on the tidal ecology of Alaska, fungi and forest ecosystems”), and seminars across the disciplines where students practice written, oral, and craft-based expression in “topics from queer literature to Greek tragedy to the economics of rural Alaska.” Read more at <https://outercoast.org/the-three-pillars/academics/>

⁸*Academics*. Outer Coast. <https://outercoast.org/the-three-pillars/academics/>

FINDING DEMOCRACY IN STORYTELLING AND NARRATIVE

Over the course of five years of programming, storytelling and oral narrative have come to play a foundational role in our academic and community life, connecting us to the traditions of Lingít Aaní, the community of Sitka, and to each other. Democratic schools are ones that help students feel like their culture and experiences are an asset (both to them and to their peers) instead of something that has to be checked at the door to succeed. Story-rich environments allow students to be empowered in their identity through the full attention of their community. I believe communities like Outer Coast flourish because of the premium we put on attention—equitable, reciprocal attention that can be found organically in the act of storytelling.

In the academic pillar, stories act as both the medium (the content of the classroom) and the method (a way to bring content alive). Most mornings in Indigenous Studies, one student opens class by doing a 10-minute no-notes ‘re-telling’ of their homework reading. The ask is not just to memorize and recount the plot, but to become absorbed in what the text offers up, to perform the texture and affect of it, and to be its advocate. Students hone their abilities as readers and as listeners for narrative frames and rhythms and have come to treat their taking of the stage with a good-kind-of-nerves readiness. (Each student sits at the ‘storytellers throne’, a pristine antique yellow Victorian-era armchair that a kind Sitka neighbor donated from their basement.)

In the Indigenous Studies and Tlingit Language course that all students take—co-taught by Sitka Tradition Bearer Yeidikook’áa Dionne Brady-Howard and Dean Matthew Spellberg—the pedagogy of oral literature and oration mirrors how Tlingit culture and histories have been passed down through generations. Twice a month, students use the final exam questions from the ‘Axe Handle Academy’ (a proposal for a “bioregional, thematic humanities curriculum”⁹ rooted in Alaska Native values and worldviews) as the point of departure for a public narrative given to the full community.¹⁰ One student responds to the Axe Handle prompt

⁹ *The Axe Handle Academy*. Ankn.uaf.edu. <http://ankn.uaf.edu/curriculum/axehandle/>

¹⁰ The linguists Ron and Suzanne Scollon wrote the proposal for the Axe Handle Academy in 1896 and entered into collaboration with the great scholars of Tlingit Richard and Nora Dauenhauer, then of the Sealaska Heritage Foundation in Juneau, Alaska. Gary Snyder’s collection of poems *Axe Handles*, published right around then, was the inspiration for the name. The Axe Handle Academy itself is a case study for democratic schooling: an exemplar of how an academic identity rooted in place can inspire civic and environmental action.

“Name the prominent landforms in your bioregion” by talking about the rivers at the fish camp where he goes in the summers which is the place he feels most like home. The Axe Handle prompt “Discuss the difference between pride in your culture and arrogance” was the opening that one isolated student this summer needed to share her perspective on traditional dancing, kinship, and queerness in her White Mountain Apache community.

These orations are strange, genre-bending speeches: a tapestry of research, analysis, opinion, and personal storytelling. Most of all, they honor students’ experiences as having something worthwhile to bear on the answers to these ‘Axe Handle’ questions of land and culture, and through their storytelling each student becomes an important contributor to our collective relationship to place.

Most importantly, to know the history of Sitka is to know its stories. Last year during student orientation, K̄aagwáask’ Ishmael Angaluuk Hope, a Tlingit and Iñupiaq poet, scholar, and culture bearer, shared with us some of the integral stories that shape Tlingit culture in the very place we are.¹¹ He gestured down the road to the essential Herring Rock of the Kiks.ádi and to the flat-top rock near campus, both important sites in the Kiks.ádi story where Keitlyátx’i Héeni (Puppy Creek) gets its name. “It happened right there!” he said. “It’s right there in front of you, it’s where you are!” Foundational Tlingit cultural events occurred right here, “*right where we are!*”—and we are continually learning that knowing and honoring those stories is one of the greatest responsibilities we have as an educational institution on this campus. These stories are a portal to a strong, relevant, culturally responsive curriculum in the classroom and invite Outer Coast into dialogue with everything around us.

During my time there, the hot hearth of the Outer Coast community was a monthly storytelling showcase where each person, staff and faculty included, could tell a true story from their life about “a time that something changed”. I would walk the loop trail at Tlingit Aaní Hídi Park with students to help them brainstorm, talking from under the hoods of drenched raincoats and surrounded by tunnels of trees and electric green moss. (One lap if they were really confident, up to four laps if they were nervous.) We would workshop and practice and together feel the

¹¹You can read more about his work in this interview: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/blogs/national-museum-american-indian/2022/04/28/Alaskan-Native-Poet-is-featured-for-National-Poetry-Month/>

satisfaction of cohesion forming between different threads of their experiences. A first time dressing in drag; an unexpected friendship with a tattooed neighbor; accounts of growing up and growing out of town; of family love, loss, and uncertainty. I saw storytelling of this kind crack open a space in schools for people to ‘meet’ each other in new ways. And in these openings, students created and re-created again and again their sense of each other and of the community as stories were shared from the yellow Victorian armchair. Storytelling kept our community identity malleable and reflexive and open to change, all things core to a democratic institution.

Telling stories is “identity work: reenacting who we have been and forging the persons we become” (Ganz, 2001). Narrative is essential to the process of becoming—the development of identity, self-concept, and self-belief and the construction of our relationship to others: becoming. Outer Coast students are at that particular age of transition where you go from leading a life based on the stories people tell about you, to building a life through the stories you can tell about yourself. I think the command of one’s story, and ability to communicate it to others, is a necessary condition for democratic engagement, to practice self-authorship before turning outward to others.

Organizationally, the school culture is what ‘becomes’. Telling stories of past Outer Coast programs and student cohorts is what allowed us as a community to manage “unpredictability [of the present through] recollection of how we dealt with those challenges in the past” (Ganz, 2001). We’ve changed our approach to our student orientation accordingly. What were once majority informational sessions—telling and reading about the values and culture of the institution—we reframed as a platform for stories where values could be visualized and so more easily internalized. Instead of intellectualizing the drug and alcohol policy in a speech, an alum came in and told the story of how substance use had led to shallow, fragile relationship-building in her cohort. Harder, and what we’re still in the learning process of, is to find the right tack to talk about past student cohorts: instead of describing the value of restorative practices for conflict resolution, to tell stories of times where real students have broken trust, and what was done to repair the harm.

The first programmatic version of story-sharing at the 2018 summer seminar had little anatomy to the space. This had its own magic to it, to be sure, but more so for a subset of students predisposed to thrive in that ambiguity. We found that the more specificity to the ‘ask’ of storytelling that was added each year, the more equitably students allowed themselves

the permission to participate in full, and the greater the sense of occasion grew. Structure begat freedom and democratized student engagement. We learned that working within constraints about what makes a story engendered new ways of thinking and sharing for all of us and that an equally important purpose of these constraints was simply to give us something to break with creative purpose. The container of the storytelling showcase that we built was structural—the prompts, the hosting rituals, the expectation for preparation, and investment of the storyteller (those walks around the park with students)—but it was also a ‘psychic container’, a space that has the balance of flexibility and rigidity that we needed for real vulnerability, risk-taking, and connection.

Storytelling has far from reached its full potential as a part of the fabric of the Outer Coast institution. We have a vast pedagogical undertaking, and opportunity, in front of us. We’ve begun to catalog the friction points and develop our language and frameworks around the ideas of the story.¹² For example, how to talk about the difference between vulnerability, and disclosure, which can often be confused? How to think about the difference between anecdote and story and know how to recognize what is ‘knocking on the door’ waiting to be told? How do we strike the balance between treating the craft of stories and narratives as real work and part of an Outer Coast education—while not overshadowing or losing the humanity and spirit of stories told amidst community for their own sake?

The Outer Coast project as a whole attempts to efface distinctions between academic and non-academic learning, and storytelling helps to do just that for students. For one example, in the Spring Semester of 2022, I found myself on dozens of walks with students (about future planning, self-governance tensions) where one of us would eventually connect how the themes of the conversation resonated with those explored in the stories from *Haa Shuká: Our Ancestors: Tlingit Oral Narratives*, a collection of foundational Tlingit oral literature we read for class.¹³ This is what myths and stories—cultural and otherwise—do for us. They help us make sense of the world and our relationships. They give us frameworks for moving through stages of change. If democratic schools aim to be

¹² Aided by the ideas of storytelling pedagogue Michelle Darby, Outer Coast staff Rachel Thomson, and The Moth organization.

¹³ Nora Marks Dauenhauer, & Dauenhauer, R. (1999). *Haa Shuká, our ancestors: Tlingit oral narratives*. University of Washington Press.

sense-making institutions, inside and outside of the classroom, storytelling and narrative will always be at their center.

STUDENT SELF-GOVERNANCE, EFFORT, AND EASE

Outer Coast is a co-authored institution. Democratic schooling relies on the idea that together we can create something more than the sum of our parts. At Outer Coast, this means that rather than an approach that maximizes each student's ability to do what they want at all times, our hope is to prioritize the unity, camaraderie, and *heat* that can only be generated when living and learning are done in tandem. Education researcher Jal Mehta once described to a room full of teachers how schools have come to resemble "a play where both student and teacher are reading roles that they did not write and do not want to be in" (and I promptly cracked up laughing in resonance). For me, the goal of an Outer Coast education is to allow for a dynamism, a living correspondence between students and staff¹⁴ that produces meaningful work—the type of play where each person can feel fully realized as an individual and, simultaneously, essential to the larger whole.

The 'what' of co-authorship at Outer Coast is straightforward: students gather weekly at autonomous Student Body meetings, chair the Applications Committee (AppComm) to recruit and select future cohorts, craft plans for communal living, and attend strategic planning meetings about college-building and organizational growth. Students serve on the Board of Trustees and have increasingly been hired into staff roles. It is an invitation into real stakes and real consequences.

The 'how' of co-authorship continually evolves. We've resonated with Hart's Ladder of Youth Engagement: the idea that the highest level of student empowerment is not control in a silo, but where every stakeholder gets a seat at the table, student and staff alike (Hart, 1992). In self-governance, the priority is not to litigate the right to make decisions but to learn the intricacies of a good democratic process together: that the details matter, that relationships are as important as ideas, that good communication is hard, and that big change is often the sum of many incremental steps. Our goal is for students to be compelled by the role that 'governance-of-the-self' plays in self-governance: that so much of one's own agency can be exercised in how you show up in your community

¹⁴'Staff and Faculty'.

rather than what you demand of it; and, to think imaginatively about what Outer Coast staffully once called the ‘z-axis’ of self-governance: moving past tinkering with what structures or rules exist in front of them and allowing themselves the permission to experiment with the infrastructure of the Outer Coast project itself. The late Dr. Sol Neely (a teacher and scholar of political philosophy and Indigenous Studies and former Outer Coast faculty member) would call this ‘to imagine otherwise.’” It’s the one demand he made of his students in every class, to be open to the possibilities of world-building beyond the constraints of what they knew and saw. This, in essence, is what democratic schools seek to do, too: to crack open our current conceptions of what is possible for a school and, by extension, the world—to be.

Decisions of communal living have been the richest site for students to engage with questions of democratic governance, and I will always see the project of communal living, where everyone shares in the essential, unglamorous labor of running a campus/home as integral, not auxiliary, to an education. I remember sitting in the office with one student mapping out on a whiteboard all the different considerations for how he wanted to build better systems of accountability and motivation for the quotidian responsibilities of the community. Students weren’t doing their chores, the kitchen was a wreck. Who communicates the message and how? What are the ethics of public shaming? Can a sense of levity and playfulness change the dynamic around work? How do accountability systems adapt for a student struggling with depression who isn’t contributing their fair share (and what should ‘fair share’ mean for us)? How a group divides labor can be a window into how they care for their relationships. The conversation about why we do work, and for whom, is as important as anything, and students learn that the outcomes of their governance mean little without pride in the quality of their relationships in the process. I’ve seen Jenny Odell’s idea of “maintenance” begin making sense to students applied to labor of spaces, but quickly translate to the labor of relationships: the satisfaction and value of showing up, of consistency, and of the daily care that makes webs of human connection strong (Odell, 2020). A student once said that they figured out the real work of Outer Coast was about kinship. Another told me that the most important thing they learned by the end of nine months was the shift of thinking that real

governance wasn't effort expended to change other people's behaviors, but finding creative solutions to live well together.¹⁵

Communal living should be what allows self-governance to reach its highest potential. Where trust, camaraderie, and the intimacy of relationships mean hard conversations happen with respect. And the formality and bureaucracy of governance can be transcended by a group that sees one another as whole people. But at the same time, these relationships can be a liability. Time and again, when the social fabric of the Student Body rifts, it can foreclose students' ability to engage in self-governance altogether. Desire to maintain social relationships means conflict resolution can be pushed off, and at times, students have stopped holding meetings rather than face tension. Interestingly, no cohort has ever chosen to elect a Student Body president, or elect differentiated positions of leadership, because this step might differentiate students' social positions, too. How and why do communal living relationships shift between empowering and paralyzing forces? Students feel like wearing different hats in their social and governance lives makes their relationships less authentic, but in what ways could brighter lines actually unlock more cohesion among them? The fraught nature of living and working together is not a bug in successful self-governance, but a meaningful feature of it: the opportunity of self-governance as part of an education. As staffulty, we want to set students up for success to rise to the occasion of their own institutional leadership and support them in grappling with questions of balancing self and other while still allowing them the respect of owning their own conflicts and resolutions. When students stop holding self-governance meetings, do staffulty become involved?

The schedule matters: the why of the gathering, who is in the room, and with what frequency has accounted for much debate and experimentation. Each ritual meeting is a case study of how students and staffulty are thinking about co-ownership at any given time at Outer Coast.

We spent many programs trying to hone the premise and structure of a weekly, hour-long full-community governance meeting that just wasn't clicking. Eventually we learned the lesson of being able to declare a 'cold space'—something conceptually important, but not lived in warmly—and

¹⁵ One of Outer Coast's core values is to empower the community with the skills, resources, and mutual trust to live well as a collective, encapsulated in the Tlingit phrase *K'idéin k'udusteeyí*: To Live Well. Aatlein gunalchéesh to X̱'uncel Lance Twitchell for giving these words to our community.

move on. ‘Follow the warmth’, an adopted phrase from my time at the Gakko Project, became the mantra we used to design what came next.¹⁶ We studied the gatherings that already had organic importance, joys, and desire and allowed ourselves to lean further into them, like our weekly feasts, cooking together, and storytelling gatherings, all spaces where equal, intrinsic investment from students and staffulty had harmonized on its own. One goal for having full-community governance meetings was to have at least one space where the entire community could be in one place. This year we moved to establish a weekly required Tlingit Language study group (as part of our core Indigenous Studies class, but involving the entire Outer Coast community, including staffulty) that served that same purpose in a reshuffled way and flourished.

That being said, full-community dialogues still have a place at Outer Coast, and we’ll need to crack the code on the structures and attitudes that will make the compelling ethos match the lived experience. The schedule may always be an unresolved project, even past the opening of the college, because democratic schooling is a responsive cycle. It is iterative, patient, and disciplined, with the humility to reshape itself again and again. As Outer Coast enters the college accreditation process, we will be required to articulate with more precision than ever our mission, methods, student outcomes, and evaluation practices. We approach this work with deep excitement and conviction in our sense of self as a school (grown over eight years) and also will be challenged to find a balance between a strong identity and that iterative, open-to-change mentality.

We initially conceptualized successful co-authorship to mean the equal and joint student/staffulty ownership of organizational spaces—communally populated agendas, shared meeting leadership, and every space seen as ‘yours too’. We later found that, at times, single-owned (and in the words of Priya Parker) ‘generously authoritative’ spaces by individuals (students, staff, faculty all alike) had an even more important democratizing role to play in our community (Parker, 2020). Because when everyone owns everything, real ownership is sometimes felt by none. Structures of meeting that arose from need (instead of chosen based on what was most easily perceptible as a democratic structure) allowed for more intrinsic investment and a deep sense of enjoyment by all. For us, real democratic equality across students and staffulty felt strongest from putting a premium on the texture and quality of the meetings themselves, working

¹⁶<https://www.gakko.org>

eye-to-eye with respect, transparency, and frankness rather than from shared meeting infrastructure alone. Consensus is a part of but not synonymous with democracy. And we've seen democratic values actualized in all different forms of our organizational structure. This freedom of thought about what democracy looks like produced exciting developments in our culture around gatherings. Student-grown spaces developed whole systems of moderation and facilitation and a sense of ritual that was only possible in a peer space, late on a Friday night once staffulty had long gone home. Invitations to staffulty into these spaces and students into ours were made intentionally and warmly, and we act as each other's reciprocal hosts—and with authority. This concept we gratefully owe to being students of Tlingit modes of governance, systems in which the act of hosting is deliberate, joyous, and filled with honor and where reciprocity is cultural tradition—songs, speeches, and gifts are most often met with a counterpart to acknowledge, respond to, and balance the initial offering. We learn from Tlingit culture ideas for how group correspondence can bring connection and cohesion to communal life, decision-making, and celebration.¹⁷

An Outer Coast coworker, Joe Weyhmler, once said that what co-authorship can do is make students who come in thinking things 'happen to them' leave thinking 'I make things happen'. 'Education is something that happens to me' or 'education is something I can make happen.' Democratic schools have the opportunity to create conditions in which apathy or passivity is not the easiest option or natural resting state. A prime example of organic student investment at Outer Coast was the Tlingit Language Conference, a weekend of gathering that we hosted for the first time in Spring 2022, where elders, language teachers, and learners from all over Southeast Alaska and the Yukon (who, along with our Dean, constitute a longtime language study group that calls itself the Tlingit Nerdz) came to Sitka to bask in language learning and intergenerational friendship. And for four joyous days together, the community was held up by the Tlingit language. When approaching the conference, students understood both the philosophical valence of the opportunity (they study the critical role that language plays in thriving Alaska Native culture and communities all year) and the practical level of the need (there were 15 elders

¹⁷Learn more about Tlingit kinship and cultural systems of balance and reciprocity in the introductory chapters of *Haa Shuká: Our Ancestors: Tlingit Oral Narratives* by Nora and Richard Dauenhauer and in Thomas Thorton's book *Being and Place Among the Tlingit*.

arriving on our campus in a month, and when they got there, it was on us to make sure they were fed, taken care of, and hosted well).

In the weeks prior to the conference, it is hard to overstate the electricity of anticipation, engagement, and cohesion of the Outer Coast community, in large part because it felt so straightforward to all of us what needed to be done. If we don't cook a feast, everyone will be hungry. If we don't study our Tlingit phrases, the 'Nerdz' won't feel a sense of respect and warmth. Both traditional learning (we studied language, culture, and story to prepare events for the conference) and nontraditional learning (cooking cultural foods and making gifts of salmonberry jam and Bannock bread as a form of learning) flowed naturally from circumstance and resources around us. Opening up to our community and bringing in significance larger and more important than just ourselves democratized the work and learning internally across staffulty and students. We all took on the same role of host. At large, it was the difference between a teacher begging a student to do an assignment that only they will see, and co-collaborators facing outward in parallel, greeting and welcoming in others.

In all the ways that the design of democratic systems has felt complex at Outer Coast, the language conference felt as intuitive as we've seen it. After operating the majority of our years in the pandemic, we're now free to re-configure the arc of the program around this notion entirely—a year-long schedule that is built to hold a trinity of outward-facing work: staffing crew for the Sharing Our Knowledge¹⁸ conference, community preparations for the Sitka Herring Protectors¹⁹ Yaaw Koo.éex' (Herring Ceremony), and hosting the 2023 Tlingit Language Learners Teaching Learners conference.

A conference attendee and member of the Tlingit Nerdz study group once called Outer Coast a 'safe harbor'. Our hope, and maybe the hope of all democratic schools, is to be an institution that is a safe harbor for the knowledge and conversations that matter most to our concentric circles of community. And to be a safe harbor for students and their identities, where they can show up as plainly themselves and then give that affordance to each other through their attention, care, and non-judgment. Both of these harbors grow in all of us a powerful and necessary feeling. It's knowing you are part of something much larger than yourself. One of the Tlingit Nerdz says, "Safe harbors are those rare places where

¹⁸<https://www.sharingourknowledge.org/>

¹⁹<https://www.herringprotectors.org/>

acceptance and a holding-out of hands occur. And then we find the time and inner strength to take those courageous steps towards becoming safe harbors for others. That is so very much what this world needs in order to change. At Outer Coast, time, that priceless time, is given an important space. Storytelling, reading, discussing, walking with the sgóonwaan [students], being on the land, reaching out. Time very much has been given a place in that safe harbor that is Outer Coast.”

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BirdHouse: A Wholesome and Joyful Homeschool Co-op

Lydia Cao

INTRODUCTION

BirdHouse (birdhousecoop.org) is a wholesome and joyful homeschool co-op for elementary children and their families. The concept was born in Professor Linda F. Nathan's class at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. A homeschool co-op, short for cooperative, is a community of families who get together to facilitate learning and recreational activities mostly for homeschooled children. Homeschooling is a unique space where parents choose to educate their children at home for various reasons, such as having the flexibility and control over their children's education, providing children with individual attention, concerns about academic quality and school environments, and accommodation for special learning needs (Hanover Research, 2021). In the US, the number of homeschooled children has been increasing at an estimated rate of 2–8 per cent every year with a drastic increase during the pandemic (Ray, 2022). Despite the increasing popularity of homeschooling and the resources

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available, much of the focus is on providing parents with “great things you can do for/with your children” rather than “empowering parents to do great things”. BirdHouse aims to shift this paradigm, democratising quality education by empowering parents to be great educators, shifting the role of parents from passively following guidelines and consuming content to actively understanding, applying, and orchestrating various instructional approaches and teaching strategies.

At BirdHouse, we believe that committed parents are the most powerful educators for their children. We aspire to empower parents to be great educators. We make it easy for parents to successfully run a homeschool co-op in their local community and create opportunities for parents to pick up powerful teaching and learning practices by providing “just-in-time” bite-size teaching tips taken from proven learning principles and research.

Since its conception in winter 2021, BirdHouse has been piloted in Rhode Island and Colorado in the US and garnered interest and support from parents around the world, including Canada, Columbia, France, Pakistan, and the UK. BirdHouse is underpinned by fundamental principles about how learning works and what is worth learning without strictly following a particular curriculum, making our approach unique and adaptable across educational contexts around the globe.

The idea of building a co-op originates from my conversations with homeschool parents in class, who often talked about the lack of opportunities for children to learn together with their peers. As an educator, I understand the importance of collaborative learning, which is critical not only for social-emotional development but also for deep learning to take place. Research shows that children learn to think in the context of relationships and interactions (Wegerif, 2011; Wegerif et al., 1999). In other words, social interactions are indispensable for learning.

FIVE DEMOCRATIC VALUES

The design of BirdHouse revolves around five core democratic values. These five values not only are powerful for learning but also lead to healthy personal development to become fulfilled and community-oriented individuals.

1. *Agency*. We honour children’s agency by giving them choices and the right to make decisions for themselves. Parents are there to sup-

port and learn with children, but ultimately children kindle their own embers of curiosity, and they have to make the choice to try and “leap into the unknown”.

2. *Awareness*: Parents help to cultivate children’s awareness of their physical and emotional state to be happy and fulfilled learners and individuals. We also recognise the importance for children to be aware of their own biases, assumptions, and the cultural lens they use to interpret the world and interact with people.
3. *Appreciation*: It is easy to overlook the beauty in the world and take things for granted. In BirdHouse, children develop and express an appreciation for their family, community, nature, and each other.
4. *Curiosity*: Children are natural learners. BirdHouse focuses on nourishing children’s natural sense of curiosity, awe, and wonder so that these qualities remain at the forefront of their learning and living experiences.
5. *Togetherness*: We need each other to learn, to work, and to live together. Learning alongside others enriches learning for all.

DESIGN FEATURES OF BIRDHOUSE

BirdHouse, as a collaborative learning experience, is an enrichment to homeschooling rather than replacement. To better understand the design features of BirdHouse in the homeschool context, I compare it with the traditional sense of school:

BirdHouse is unlike a traditional sense of school in four ways.

First of all, BirdHouse exists within a community of families. Though a physical gathering space is essential, Birdhouse doesn’t necessarily require a fixed building or location, meaning that parents can rotate the location of BirdHouse, such as their homes, community space, parks, and museums. Families together decide the number of children they can host (depending on their comfort level, the size of their home, etc.).

Secondly, unlike most schools that are organised into grade levels, BirdHouse often has mixed-age groups of learners from kindergarten through sixth grade. In our experience, children flourish in a diverse group with different expertise and experiences. Research showed that multi-age groups favour nurturance over competition, creating a socially and psychologically safe environment for children to learn and grow (Pratt, 1986).

Thirdly, BirdHouse is organised into “seasons” instead of semesters, corresponding to the rhythmic cycle of nature. Each season consists of six days, and families have the flexibility to determine how often they would like to meet (e.g. weekly or bi-weekly). Parents and children can choose the number of seasons they would like to run in a year. Unlike a unit that revolves around one topic (e.g. planets and marine animals), each season is dedicated to exploring one big authentic question that is interdisciplinary in nature, such as “What are differences between science and magic?”, “What is math?”, “Is history just facts about the past?”, and “Why do we get sick?” These big questions have multiple entry points accommodating learners of different ages and interests. Exploring these authentic questions supports children in forming a solid knowledge foundation, building critical skills, and preparing them for future learning.

Last but not least, BirdHouse is entirely run by parents and children who decide how they want their BirdHouse to be. Our job is to enable, support, and watch parents and children thrive! Birdhouse provides structure, research, and effective pedagogies, but the individual culture and flavour of each Birdhouse are up to the families and children. In the words of a BirdHouse parent, Allie Johnston:

BirdHouse came alive for our learners. Our BirdHouse feels both grounded in research and aloft at great heights of personalised possibility. It grew with us, too.

I do not feel like we piloted a BirdHouse, or implemented a Birdhouse. We became a BirdHouse, and we made BirdHouse our own.

PRODUCTIVE DESIGN TENSIONS

1. Structure Versus Flexibility

Having a consistent structure reduces the cognitive load of parents and children. When children know what to expect in the day, they can better channel their mental energy into the substance of learning. At the same time, BirdHouse is flexible, allowing parents to tailor and swiftly adapt BirdHouse for their unique group of learners. BirdHouse is structured into six “routines” that are easy to follow (see Images. [29.1](#), [29.2](#), [29.3](#), [29.4](#), [29.5](#) and [29.6](#)). These routines are:

Nest Gathering

Children and parents engage in dialogue on topics, things that are meaningful to them using a dialogic approach. Children talk together to develop more cohesive, evidence-based, and logical arguments and ultimately become better thinkers!

For instance, children explored the notion of diversity in the context of the diversity of birds in the ecosystem. They deepened their appreciation of their homes and family in relation to the ingenuity of bird nests.

Bird Feed

Children work together to prepare lunch guided by parents. We believe that it is important for children to establish a healthy relationship with food and understand what they are eating and where they come from. Children develop deep gratitude for nature, animals, plants, and people and enjoy a community dining experience.

Together, children created a variety of dishes together, such as summer succotash, bird nest pasta, and personalised pizza, and tangram sandwich.

Bird Explore

Bird Explore is an inquiry-based activity that is usually led by parents but requires children to do the intellectual heavy lifting and collaborate. In each season, we explore a different big question. For instance, children engaged in a series of activities and discussions, such as comparing different ways of counting, measurement, and identification of patterns, to make sense of what mathematics is for them.

Bird Play

Bird Play is made of structured play and unstructured play (free play). Structured play is thoughtfully crafted for educational goals, and unstructured play gives children the freedom to explore the world with their agency. Both types of play are fundamental for children to flourish physically, emotionally, mentally, and socially. Our games are designed to be collaborative and inclusive in nature. For instance, in our Scavenger Hunt, each child's strength and power are leveraged for the team to succeed.

Bird Coo

Bird Coo is a chance for children to centre and stay in touch with themselves. We encourage parents to explore various exercises with children, such as guided meditation, mindful drawing, slow looking, eating with attention, or simply sitting under a tree and listening.

For instance, children engaged in a series of guided meditations to develop patience, cultivate their unique personal power, find peace, and grow as a whole person who is cognitively and emotionally intelligent.

Flap Wings

Flap Wings is designed for self-directed activity. We find children's schedules are often too crowded, and they rarely have what they call "free time". We believe that it is important for children to have time for themselves and have the agency to decide how they want to make use of their time.

For example, children can make use of this time to create art, build Lego structures, write, play games, and explore nature.



Image 29.1 Nest Gathering. (Photo credit: Melissa LaCouture)



Image 29.2 Bird Explore. (Photo credit: Melissa LaCouture)



Image 29.3 Bird Coo. (Photo credit: Sandeep Kr Yadav)



Image 29.4 Bird Feed. (Photo credit: Melissa LaCouture)



Image 29.5 Bird Play. (Photo credit: Katherine Hanlon)



Image 29.6 Flap Wings. (Photo credit: Sigmund)

Flexibility is built into the structure. Parents and children have the freedom to adapt the routines and activities that best work for them. For instance, in our previous pilot, we saw parents adding new routines for a group of neurodivergent learners, such as “Bird Stretch” in the middle of “Bird Explore”, to give children a sensory break and support them to have more sustained focus. In our experience, the flexible nature of BirdHouse gave children a sense of freedom and strengthened their agency to direct their learning. Because nothing is obligatory and there are always multiple entry points to learning and multiple ways to express understanding, children feel safe to take risks. We observed in our pilots the power of agency and the safety in the community. Parents vividly accounted for their surprise when their children took the initiative to do things that they would not normally initiate by themselves, such as writing poems and doing mathematics.

2. Collectivity Versus Individuality

There is a tension between designing for collectivity and individuality. We believe both are essential for children to thrive. Children should have the agency to explore their interests and learn at a pace that they are most comfortable with and at the same time learn to collaborate, negotiate, resolve conflicts, and ultimately learn and live with others. That is why collectivity and individuality are seamlessly interwoven into the fabric of the BirdHouse design. For example, many BirdHouse routines and activities foster a strong sense of togetherness among children, such as Nest Gathering, Bird Feed, and Bird Play. At the same time, we afford children agency to make choices for themselves, such as discussing their individual “Nest Project”, selecting the task during Bird Feed, and ‘levelled’ self-expressions in Bird Explore, which give learners choice to engage in challenging yet doable activities, the sweet spot where learning takes place!

During Bird Explore, there are activities that all children engage in, which we call “shared expressions” because we believe that learning is a way of self-expression.

These are open-ended activities with multiple entry points for different age groups.

In addition to shared expressions, we also have individual expressions, designed for different interests, levels of understanding, and developmental stages. We level our expressions into (1) the hatching, (2) the nestling, and (3) the fledgling. For example, on one of the days in the season of

science and magic, the hatchling task focuses on scientific observation and identification. The nestling task requires children to compare and contrast their observations, and the fledgling task encourages children to synthesise their observations to make hypotheses. We let children decide the task they feel most drawn to without telling them the level of the task. Children can be a hatchling in one but a fledgling in another, and what matters is what they feel most drawn to and motivated to do.

WHAT DO CHILDREN LEARN AT BIRDHOUSE?

In each season, children explore big questions from various perspectives. For example, in the science and magic unit, children started the season with big questions “What is science and magic? How are they the same and different?” The goal of the season is for children to start thinking about the epistemology of science—how scientific knowledge is constructed. Science education involves not only accepted scientific knowledge, but also an understanding of the tentative nature of the knowledge, how such knowledge is constructed, and the current debates in the field and gaps in such knowledge.

Children explored the differences between science and magic through hands-on experiments with household items, hiking in their local forest, investigating the colour of leaves, and experiencing the magic of autumn through art and poetry. Throughout the six sessions, children reflected on their own understanding of science and magic, gained new experiences, and together pushed their thinking to the next level—beginning to understand that they, as budding scientists, seek answers to questions about their worlds with joy and wonder.

Through this session, children learned:

- Science is a powerful lens to make sense of the world.
- What makes science special is scientists’ willingness to change their ideas on the basis of new evidence.
- Once we understand how things work, we can use such understanding to create magical experiences.
- Science and magic can intertwine. Something that appears magical often has scientific explanations.
- We often think something is magic when we don’t have an explanation for it. However, we can still experience magic even if we understand how things work. Understanding why leaves change colour from a scientific lens does not take away the magical experience of walking in the autumn forest!

HOW DO WE EMPOWER PARENTS?


We empower parents by providing them with choices in activities, practical tips, and evidence-based teaching practice. Each activity is presented in the form of a printable card, which parents and children assemble to make their day. Each card comes with suggested activities, facilitation tips, and digestible and relevant research (see Images 29.7 and 29.8), so parents not only know what activity they could conduct, and how to conduct it, but also the whys behind, and they could apply their learning into other contexts and interactions with their children. Such “just-in-time” learning fits the busy lifestyle of homeschool parents, and parents pick up these powerful teaching practices by doing it. Of course, there are blank cards with prompts to help families to create their own activities. We are also in the process of developing asynchronous bite-size learning modules for parents (see Images 29.7 and 29.8).



Nest Gathering

**What is math to you?
How do you feel about math?**

Other helpful prompts:
Where do you find math?
When do we use math?
Is math just numbers?
When does math make you feel good?



Understanding goal:
Children will reveal their initial thinking and feeling about math.



Facilitation tips:
Focus on eliciting children's ideas and encourage children to listen to and build on each other's ideas without evaluating whether an idea is right or wrong. For example, you can say "Ava said that math is numbers. Does anyone else have the same idea? Does anyone have a different idea?" The purpose is to make visible children's initial ideas, so you are aware of their understanding/misunderstanding, which allows you to best support children to further develop their ideas.



Research Snippets: Learning and emotions
Learning is both cognitive and affective. This means that children learn both through reasoning and emotions. This is why we are asking children to engage both cognitively to reason about 'what is math' and 'how they feel towards math'.

Dr Megan Cuzzolino, a researcher at Harvard Graduate School of Education found that one type of emotion, called 'epistemic emotions' are particularly helpful for learning to take place. These are emotions that drive people to find out and pursue new knowledge, such as surprise, curiosity, wonder, and awe. Parents can help children to learn by inducing these epistemic emotions. For example, showing to children a puzzling phenomenon, asking them how something works, and introducing open-ended exploratory activities.

At the same time, emotions, such as anxiety, shame, fear, and frustration can block children from learning. Children have to feel emotionally safe in order to learn. This is why it is so important to foster a safe and open community. As parents, it is important to be aware of children's emotions during learning.

Images 29.7 and 29.8 Example of math activity learning module Digestible understanding goals, facilitation tips, and research snippets for parents to facilitate the activity

THE FUTURE OF BIRDHOUSE

Grounded in our five democratic values (agency, awareness, appreciation, curiosity, and togetherness), we design flexible learning architecture that honours both the collectivity of the community and the uniqueness of the individual child and homeschool family. BirdHouse aspires to serve homeschool communities everywhere in the world. Because flexibility and fundamental learning principles are part of our design, BirdHouse can be built anywhere in the world.

To BirdHouse, education is empowerment, for both children and parents. The ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said, “Give a man a fish, feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, feed him for a lifetime.” At BirdHouse, we teach parents to become great educators to have a wholesome, joyful, and enriching learning experience with their children.

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PART IV

Solving Urgent Challenges



Weaving Regenerative Education: A Reflection from the Pacific Coast of Mexico

Ariel Arguedas, Colleen Fugate, and Patricia Vázquez

CONTEXT

This chapter refers to an educational project located in four rural communities in the Juluchuca micro-watershed within the state of Guerrero, Mexico (see Image 30.1). The largest community in this geographical area is Juluchuca, located at the mouth of the watershed and comprising roughly 700 inhabitants. The smallest community, Las Placitas, only has sixty-five residents and is located in the upper watershed, roughly twenty kilometers from the coast along a winding dirt road. Between Juluchuca and Las Placitas are two additional towns—Rancho Nuevo and La Ceiba—with 400 and 100 residents, respectively.

The climate in this region is classified as dry tropical, with expected rains each day from May to early October and clear skies the rest of the year. However, climate change and land use have affected these natural cycles, increasing the dry months and limiting rainfall to sporadic

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Image 30.1 Location of the Juluchuca micro-watershed in Guerrero, Mexico

torrential rains due to major climatic events such as hurricanes and tropical cyclones.

Residents in these four communities largely work in agriculture and cattle ranching, subsistence fishing, or a few small industries such as the coconut candy factories or the nearby salt flats. Over the past decade, residents have increasingly been able to find work in the tourist industry as the popularity of the beaches north of Juluchuca continues to grow among national and international visitors.

Playa Viva, located just three kilometers from Juluchuca, is a regenerative project which seeks to bring back a state of abundance to the area, restoring a balance between people and the environment. The Regenerative Education Project at Playa Viva was born with a mindset of integration and collaboration: a boutique hotel, a permaculture farm, and social and environmental impact programs are rooted in whole systems thinking and a connection to place with a strong commitment to integrate the communities of the watershed and contributing to their social, economic, and environmental well-being.

In this context, Playa Viva's team understand that democratic education is both an opportunity and a bridge to make visible those communities that have been living under scarcity and marginalization for decades.

Juluchuca is one of many places in Mexico where students are also workers; many times, their fate is shaped by where they come from. Playa Viva work is grounded in the conviction that one's origin should never dictate their destiny.

Democratic education is a pretext to talk deeply about the social and educational challenges of Mexican schools: where migration, high levels of dropouts, lack of teachers, abandoned schools, low levels of literacy and numeracy, absence of early childhood programs, and young students who prefer to be connected to criminal groups rather than attend school are commonplace.

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, Playa Viva conducted a survey in two of the local communities to learn how to best support the development of the region. Respondents shared a variety of ideas, but one message became clear: the need to invest deeply in the education of their communities. Playa Viva focused on attracting talent that could connect more closely with residents and develop a robust education program. The arrival of two experts, Colleen and Ariel, in 2018, was instrumental in the development of the social and environmental impact program. With backgrounds in sociology, psychology, education, and environmental studies, Colleen and Ariel prioritized becoming part of the communities before developing or proposing any solutions to community challenges.

Once activities flourished in Juluchuca, it felt only natural that projects expand from the lower coastal region to the upper part of the watershed. Once again, this process was organic and spontaneous. Teachers and families requested that Ariel incorporate an English program in the three communities dotting the watershed: Rancho Nuevo, La Ceiba, and Las Placitas. Each has a multi-grade primary school where the total number of students per school did not exceed eighteen students. These schools are isolated, difficult to reach, under-resourced, and forgotten by the education authorities, but they are also extremely close-knit, and families deeply value their children's education.

As Playa Viva's team began to collaborate with these schools, we understood the intertwined nature of the communities which literally depend on, and live off, the same river and are part of the same watershed. All residents want the best for their children and worry about their future in a fast-changing world. Yet despite these similarities, each community lives in

a rather isolated and insular way, a cultural distance separating Juluchuca, a large coastal town at the base of the watershed, and the communities in the mountains and the apex of the watershed.

THE PILLARS OF REGENERATIVE EDUCATION

At the beginning of 2021, a team of experienced, multidisciplinary practitioners across Mexico came together in Juluchuca to create ReSiMar (Regenerando Sierra y Mar¹), a systematic and holistic effort to regenerate the environment, economy, and community well-being. The ReSiMar strategy includes five nodes—water, fisheries, permaculture, ecosystem restoration, and regenerative education—and is deeply rooted in the strong ties built between Playa Viva and the communities in the Juluchuca watershed.

What does it mean to regenerate from an educational perspective? Regenerative education starts with the recognition of being part of a living ecosystem and taking action to help that ecosystem flourish. Regenerative education fosters awareness of our interconnection and interdependence, both with human and with non-human life, and by internalizing this, it means moving from a mindset of judgment and isolation to an embodiment of empathy and collaboration.

Regenerative education brings its knowledge from broad theories and adaptation mostly of *Regenerative Life* by Carol Sanford. Four guiding principles are considered for regenerative education: (1) **regenerate**, as the main purpose and the one that frames all the actions; the one intended to engage and empower local leaders is (2) **enable**; a place where all genders, ages, and backgrounds have a place is (4) inclusion; and to ensure the integration of cultural values embracing that all contexts are different is (4) **preservation**.

The regenerative education node has considered these four guiding principles but also added some values that could transversally be included in all education activities, such as living with purpose, connecting to yourself to connect with nature, being able to learn in any stage of their lives, have the joy of learning, revitalizing learning processes, promoting a sense of belonging, feeling proud of the land you were born and raised, visualizing the relations that happen in any learning environment, and recovering learning communities.

¹In English, this roughly translates as “regenerating the sea and the mountains”.

The node pretends to reallocate the context, for one that is full of hope, that fights disillusionment, embraces possibilities, and heals situations. So, any place, school, or land that shares these and many other values that can be added is already regenerating its education model. Regenerative education is a provocation to reshape the conversation about what education should look like and not only to center all the actions, resources, activities, and learning objectives in kids that are the present but to help them reflect on the changes that need to happen to live in a better and healthy world. Their world.

LAS PLACITAS AND A TEACHER TRANSFORMING EDUCATION

Maestro Belén is breaking down some of the many barriers in Juluchuca; a native of La Ceiba (in the upper watershed) and current resident of Juluchuca, Belén has been the lead teacher at the Emiliano Zapata rural primary school in Las Placitas for six years. A close-knit community of just sixty-five residents, Las Placitas quickly became the launching point for a Regenerative Education Project.

Every day since 2016, Maestro Belén travels an hour by motorcycle on a winding dirt road up the mountain to teach grades first to sixth to eighteen eager students. With a background in engineering, Maestro Belén never envisioned being a teacher, but on a visit back to Juluchuca, he was asked by the parents of Las Placitas if he could teach at their school because the government claimed that the number of students was too small to allocate a government teacher. Belén agreed and taught at the school for five years, where he discovered his passion for teaching. Belén then went back to school to get another degree in education to become eligible for the government *plaza*, or official teaching post. Unfortunately, the bureaucracy and institutional complexity of the educational system of Guerrero² have prevented him from securing his government-appointed teaching position; however, thanks to the support of Playa Viva guests, private funding was secured to offer him a salary to continue his important work.

Belén's passion and love for education are evident in every pore of his skin. His students respect and love him, as do their parents and other

²One of the four states out of thirty-two in Mexico with the lowest results in education, poverty, and inequalities. Not to say that the teacher's union plays a very important role in the decision-making process.

leaders in the community. Working in conditions with little infrastructure, resources, and materials, Maestro Belén finds a way to create didactic learning environments. Playa Viva is occasionally able to facilitate donations to the school, and on one of those visits, when asked what to do with the supplies, Maestro Belén shrugged his shoulders and said, “Ask the children what they want to do with the materials. They are the ones who will use it.”

With this simple gesture, Maestro Belén has shown his way of understanding the role of a teacher and the importance of giving students freedom, voice, and responsibility for making decisions and for their own learning processes rather than a teacher imposing answers on them. Belén has shown signs of being an extraordinary teacher by vocation, but he is not alone. He always emphasizes the crucial role played by the parents of students, who are continuously involved in the education of their children, despite limited resources.

Las Placitas School (LPS) may lack an abundance of didactic materials or comfortable spaces, but the environment in which learning takes place has views of the Sierra Madre Mountains, and from its classroom, students listen to the constant murmur of the river outside the school. Birds sing overhead and feed on the mangoes from the large tree that provides shade to the outdoor play area. The Las Placitas community has a deep sense of cohesion and mutual support among the families and the children feel safe at home and see the school as a meeting place, where they discover, learn, and play.

WALKING THE TALK OF A REGENERATIVE EDUCATION

The Regenerative Education Project was born in LPS where Maestro Belén’s work triggered a renewed focus on education. The school shines a light on all the people who remind us how to relate to the earth and to other human beings through their daily actions. These are the stories told by grandparents about the abundance of this place—the fertility of the soil and the generosity of the water. They are the traditions that unite people, the simplicity of life, and the value of sharing quality time with loved ones. The true essence of the Regenerative Education Project of the Juluchuca watershed is to remember where we come from, nourish ourselves with that wisdom, and ignite courage in the hearts of youth to imagine a future that excites us all.

LPS struggles with structural deficiencies due to unequal opportunities and gender discrimination, alcoholism, the presence of organized crime, the destruction of virgin forests, and excessive exploitation of natural resources. The students are used to learning outside, and to playing in the mud. The mission of LPS is to place learning through play as a core value to raise students', teachers', and families' consciousness about their environment, history, and inheritance.

Since 2020, LPS has been rethinking the whole curriculum and its values. Sadly, in Mexico, there is only one way of learning: the one that is delivered and created by the Federal Ministry of Education. The LPS is a small but sound example of how the community can promote change. The Regenerative Education Project has been reviewing values such as living with purpose, the joy of learning, sense of belonging, coevolution, dealing with uncertainty, appreciating reality, enabling transformation, committing passionately to understand how nature works, and creating consciousness on how to make change even if the context is surrounded by adversity.

Then, the LPS has a new and local curriculum far away from the national standards, and the challenge is not only to comprise the context but to enable new ways of learning based on the needs of the students. The curriculum has an important emphasis on socioemotional methodologies, and it is divided into three different parts where playtime, outdoor learning, mindfulness, project-based learning, music, and arts are core pillars of this learning process up in the watersheds.

GOING BEYOND: THE REGENERATIVE EDUCATION LABORATORY (REL)

In this regard, regenerating the schools of the Juluchuca watershed focuses on social inclusion and building a vision of educational opportunities from the perspective of the communities, never from the eyes of experts or specialists. The vision is to build an educational model that centers the dreams, visions, and aspirations of children and youth, parents, and caregivers. Regenerative education means making the voices of each one of the members of the community and the route to follow, to trace, and to dialogue.

The involvement of the community, the importance of the context to build language and identity, sharing best and local practices, and learning from the communities were the most important criteria for forming the Regenerative Education Laboratory (REL) within ReSiMar. Initially, an

interdisciplinary team of participants and experts from all over Mexico and abroad was formed with the common goal of reconciling views and understanding the context of Guerrero.

Poverty, marginalization, and social challenges have a decisive impact on the educational agenda and in their case are also a reason for school exclusion. In Juluchuca and in the towns that have been mentioned above, there are several children and adolescents who have dropped out of the educational system. The economic activities of the region have affected the way the school is valued. Leaving the system has become an easy path, as the need to look for an income and to have better living conditions is more common than at any other time in the history of the region. Guerrero is one of the most important states of migration.

The Laboratory makes visible that the Juluchuca watershed is a microcosm of what is happening in the entire Pacific coast of Mexico and probably in many other rural watersheds in Latin America. The members of the REL facilitated the creation of content to build the regenerative education model, but also suggested a structure in the social and environmental impact team of Playa Viva that set the challenge of drawing educational action frameworks in three dimensions: local, regional, and national. The concept of “Regenerative Education” encompasses the territory, the educational challenge, and the possibilities for the future.

The Regenerative Education Laboratory extends beyond the local Juluchuca River—the team has begun working with people from other watersheds in the country, opening space for tremendous learning and exchange of knowledge and experience. Regenerative education requires commitment among peers and investment in the human capital of communities. As part of the actions of the REL, a water education program will be incorporated in the Juluchuca watershed after Maestro Belén and team members visit other rural communities in the state of Oaxaca to incorporate the WET course (Water Education for Teachers) into the classrooms.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Regenerative education places children as the protagonists and owners of their own learning. This is the beginning of a desirable democratic education stage when aimed to think about reconnecting to their own heritage. The kids and youth are the present and the future of their own lands. Highlighting the significance of actively listening to their voices and

fostering an environment that encourages them to articulate their ideas, voice their concerns, and share their challenges. Children dream, and they should be seen as the instigators of other conversations, as the decision-makers, and as the seeds to confront upcoming challenges. The regenerative education model and the regenerative education laboratory are the leverages that aim to nurture the present generations together from grandparents' vision to grandchildren's transformation.

There are many challenges in this and many other watersheds—at school, at home, in the community, and in changing weather patterns. But, there are many other and bigger problems in the world; so many that sometimes they overwhelm us. But there is always hope, which is love's way of projecting itself into the future, a future that is looking more and more regenerative each day. And if we pay attention, nature always gives us moments that will remain engraved in our minds and hearts.

Can you imagine the conversations, the sounds, the smells of the Juluchuca watershed on the Mexican Pacific coast? Regenerative education on this side of the world arose from a project and a team that wanted to get closer to the communities. Now, the teachers, students, and parents have taken the lead in listening to what they feel and expressing what the community has inside because regenerating truly means unlearning to coincide again as one.

The youth of these communities have the unconditional support of Maestro Belén, who embodies the importance of social cohesion and harmony to unite the watershed on its regenerative journey. The communities located along the Juluchuca River are the guardians of their *arroyo* (river) and their natural resources, and in their own way, they are contributing to a much larger effort toward democracy and environmental resilience.

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Baxter Academy for Technology and Science: An Innovative STEM School that Embraces Its Enduring Tensions

Cicy Po

Baxter Academy for Technology and Science has a unique place in educational history, born from movements of the past several decades, is animated by local energy and resources, and offers an innovative and replicable possibility for schools pursuing high rigor, equity, and student engagement. It is one of the first of 10 charter schools granted in the state of Maine. There are three other public high schools in the city of Portland and two private high schools. Baxter's 2021–2022 graduation ceremony was punctuated by two students engaged in a novel collaboration during their senior year: one focused on music and music technology and the other in fabrications and engineering. Together, they spent the year creating a taller-than-human-sized Tesla coil and a theremin that could be performed, center stage, to audibly produce the tones of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow", our graduation recessional song. Sitting in those graduation seats were also students who defied stereotypes of who belongs in engineering and had led the development of a successful differential swerve drive in robotics. Some made it through with great help from our special education team and student support services, including our advisors. Others hold multiple copies of their diplomas: one for a misgendered legal name and one with their actual chosen name. Among this class is our school's meteorologist, who had spent the past four years better predicting our snow days than some of the weather newscasters. In this brief narrative, I will describe Baxter as a STEM school that cares about collective voice, innovation, and commitment to community.

Baxter Academy for Technology and Science sits in a flood zone in the rapidly transitioning Bayside Area of Portland, Maine, and serves nearly 400 students. The neighborhood is home to many social services in the city, and the new real estate developments, including eateries, recreational businesses, and offices, overshadow Bayside's historically working-class residences, warehouses, undeveloped lots, and junkyards. Baxter is a STEM-focused charter school drawing from over 50 districts and a geographic region four times the size of Rhode Island, welcoming rural, suburban, and urban students. Our school comprises 17 percent of students with IEPs,¹ or individualized special education plans, and 18 percent have 504² plans, which help students with a disability access their education. Students choose Baxter for its STEM focus, innovative academic program, and for some, as a new community to start again. We are a young school, only just approaching our tenth year.

Among our founding principles is that of co-creating knowledge between educators and students. An entire day of each week, called Flex Friday, is spent on student-led, student-designed, teacher-coached project-based learning that engages STEM tools of research, design, or making, to serve community needs; the remainder of the week is structured daily with five periods of classes in STEM, Humanities, and Design, plus an Advisory block. Town halls are among our most important all-school gatherings and are jointly orchestrated by students and administrators. Representatives from each grade meet regularly with the school's principal and assistant principal to discuss and plan for the structures, climate, and culture of the school. Last year, student leaders launched a quantitative and qualitative investigation of the Advisory program over many months. This effort

¹The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) ensures that all students, regardless of disability, have access to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). Accommodations, as needed, are determined by an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team to help provide a student's access to FAPE.

²Section 504 is a civil rights law that protects individuals with disabilities. In a school, a student with a documented 504 may be owed modification or accommodations to ensure equal access to education.

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culminated in a student-run faculty and staff meeting where together we interrogated the assets and potential of the Advisory program.

At Baxter, students encounter our real world while gaining tools to design ways to understand that world and envision new ways to meet humanity's challenges. We have courses such as Confronting Genocide and Science Technology and Ethics; it is quite common to step into our Fabrications Lab (FABLAB) and find students with their computer-aided designs open on their laptops to guide their creative projects. One student researched ways that city sidewalks can absorb carbon dioxide to build a working first model, and another group of students looked at ways to clear space debris to protect satellite investments. Engineering students developed an award-winning scalable low-cost ventilator during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two students who spend Flex Fridays interning in veterinary science have helped to develop our school's ethical guidelines for scientific research on vertebrates and their work will now be integrated into our internal review board process for future student proposals of Flex Friday projects. One of our talented digital arts students made portraits of persecuted Uighur women; another student interviewed her own family members from Myanmar. Teachers connect students with community partnerships and use the entire Portland peninsula and range of public transportation, as our campus.

Through our Baxter Speaker Series, we welcome leaders of STEM into our building so that our students learn about the needs and assets of our community and the possible ways in which they too may contribute. Speakers have included a climate change artist who appeared on the cover of *National Geographic* Magazine, medical helicopter entrepreneurs, plant and mushroom field researchers, and Atlantic Black Box, an organization that researches and reckons with New England's role in the economics of enslavement, to name just a few. Most recently, a student-led group proposed more green spaces in our city, which was shared with presenters of our Speaker Series, the city of Portland Department of Planning and Urban Development. This student effort then spurred on one of our teachers, Alex Waters, to create a new humanities course, entitled *The Maine Housing Crisis*.

At Baxter, we spend time understanding who we are in relation to who has come before us. Scholars of education like John Dewey (1916),

Deborah Meier (2002), and Ted Sizer (1997) inspired the idea of letting schools be driven in part by the power of student’s ideas; and during this time, there were some schools that grew into existence that challenged our conception of what school could be: Sudbury Valley Schools, the Met School, Coalition of Essential Schools. Within the past 40 years, the economic imperatives of *A Nation At Risk*, *No Child Left Behind*, and *Race to the Top* were the public calls for accountability that led to common core standards and data-driven and data-informed decisions—we know now that how you ask the question matters and that collecting data that reflects the persistence of inequity requires innovative tools of justice; the data itself is not the tool. Today schools like High Tech High and Science Leadership Academy hold some of the progressive ideas described by Jal Mehta (2019). As more scholars of color in education, such as W.E.B. Du Bois (1935), Richard Valencia (1997, 2010), Tara Yosso (2005), Daniel Liou (Liou & Rojas, 2019), Zaretta Hammond (2018), and Lisa Delpit (2006) were heard, the pedagogical sails shifted course: we’ll do better by our students with *anti-deficit thinking* and an acknowledgment that we serve students who are complex individuals who hold assets in *community cultural wealth*. While the innovations of the earlier scholars led to some reconstruction of the industrial model of American schooling, including new structures like mastery transcripts and open-ended student projects, these ideas led to some practitioner tensions between rigor that got pitted against strong relationships with students. The latter scholars pushed us to think that equity can’t exist in the absence of high rigor. Baxter invites scholars and school innovators like Linda F. Nathan, author of *The Hardest Questions Aren’t on the Test* (2009), to work with us to develop dispositions of learning, anchored in our mission and values, which can provide a unifying framework of learning for our school. After a year of spending time with our mission and vision, our school worked on a unifying framework for dispositions of learning. We spent several faculty meetings and then a retreat at the Wells Reserve to arrive at guiding questions for us as learners. We developed an overarching framework—that at Baxter, we make SPACE for inquiry. At present, we are testing these guiding questions for our learning community, including students and educators:

S: What **stories** are at play?

P: What’s **possible** here in innovation or iteration?

A: What **assets** do I have?

C: What is the **community** impact?

E: What **engages** my curiosity?

These guiding questions hold our educators' learning about high expectations and rigorous learning in service of our community.

Most recently, Baxter educators looked at the ways in which our assessments illuminate deeper, richer, and different capacities about our students that counter the reductive stories gleaned from standardized tests that our school is obligated to administer; an analysis of our standardized test scores shows that students performing in the lower range demonstrate high growth and students on the other end show no growth, and meanwhile, students across the school demonstrate the capacity for envisioning, collaboration, and project management. The ideas of all of these scholars find their way into our faculty and staff meetings and our new teacher formation group. We are committed to knowing if our innovation advances our equity goals or if they become a reemergence of another structure to enable persistence of old patterns of privilege; in the early days of the school, student choice was a deeply held value; however, it also led to pressures on teacher sustainability, and eventually, the students who were already independent learners were the ones who could most benefit from more choices.

During our Flex Fridays, students work in their clusters with educator coaches, mostly in teams, sometimes individually, to develop an ethical, innovative STEM project. These project proposals go to a panel of educators and are accepted or sent back to coaches for further working. At the end of the year, top projects are selected for presentation, TEDx style, in our school's Great Room; all students, whether selected to present in the Great Room or not, can exhibit in conference poster style throughout the school. Many of our teachers did not participate in teacher preparation programs that gave them the tools to be responsive to student inquiry to the degree in which we make space for at Baxter and most school communities aren't asked to provide the administrative lift to coordinate such an effort across a year. By growing into this innovation, we experience a set of enduring tensions that have felt in conflict with each other. As school leaders, we tried with great difficulty to "fix" these conflicts, only to realize that these tensions mark the work of a strong school (Fig. 31.1).

What are these tensions? If we prioritize teacher expertise, we may curb student interest; if we allow student interest to be the only driver, our educators may feel stretched too thin and far from their source of strength. It feels difficult to hold high expectations in a traditional sense of achievement when our students come from disparate places; does high rigor mean that every student must achieve calculus-based functionality? We want to

Critical Tensions from the Data

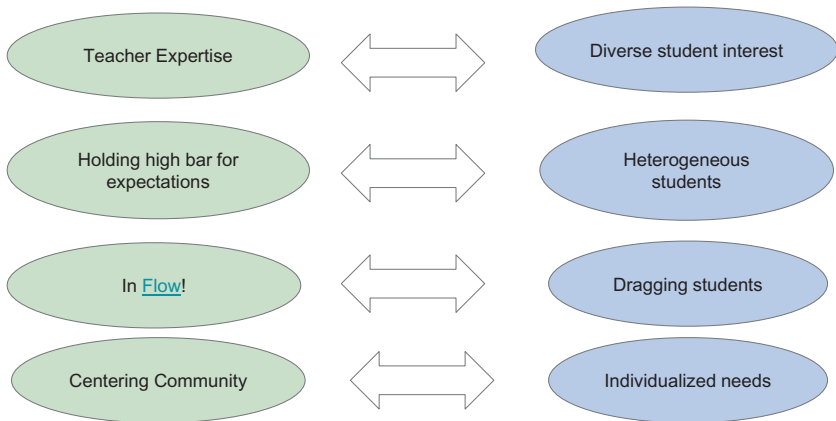


Fig. 31.1 Critical tensions of student inquiry identified by educators and school leaders

protect structures that enable students to be in what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) calls “flow” and yet how to work with students whom educators feel they are dragging along? Too much structure stifles those who are independent learners and too much release can lead to floundering for more dependent learners.

I have started saying that Baxter isn’t a place where members take away an education—that being members of a community means that we are responsive not just to individual needs but to common ones as well. We are a place of commitment and that means staying at the table for the common good. We have worked to have our teachers know students as whole people, part of families and part of communities—that any school design must be informed by what our community wants for the education of our students. These tensions surrounding design and practice have caused some colleagues to walk away from conversations in anger, caused the formations of tribes, and even led to reductionist stories about other members of the community. Tensions were so tightly wound up that for one department, we relied on the help of Craig Freshley (2022), winner of a 2019 Civvy award, whose work along the coastal communities of Maine sought to promote discourse and heal political divides and to help us better listen to each other. If you also work in an innovative school with

impassioned colleagues, you'll know that we are made up of individuals who dare and those who dare can be deeply committed to value systems that anchor and justify their daring. A school of innovation allows greater risk-taking among its teachers, but it also assumes a higher rate of learning that calls on collective and individual humility in order to come out of the learning as a stronger community. Our school, by design, holds weekly faculty and staff meetings in addition to department meetings, committee meetings, and other efforts that may emerge from year to year. These many tables enable discourse and collective wisdom to enrich our direction, listen to each other, and commit even when we might disagree.

Challenging encounters between colleagues can emerge as we defend the core of our identities as teachers, our sense of pragmatic and big picture success. A tension that was formerly a fracturing fight existed about whether our STEM school is first and foremost about high technological training or transformative adolescent development, both in a community context. Through discourse, we arrived at an understanding that neither a technocrat nor a sentimentalist approach alone can be the sole approach. While our school doesn't dwell on dress code or about what to do about hats, like all schools, we do care about engagement for our diverse students, some of whom carry home-, community-, and school-based gifts and traumas. And that in becoming warm demanders (Hammond, 2018), we need to move past the pathologization tendency born from compassion for amygdala hijacking in our students to that of having a deep belief in their capacity—that traumas are intimately tied to strengths (Liou & Rojas, 2019).

Baxter is a heterogeneous space, and just as we have diverse students, so too do our educators come with previous professional and life experiences that spur on their commitment to be members of an innovative learning community. The teacher who loves their discipline and wishes to hold high expectations for students may, at times, find themselves at odds with the teacher who is muscling hard to lift a student's confidence and counter the narrative of deficiency that the student has internalized. The most important conversation at our school involves understanding that we can't allow these tensions to be destructive; we must learn to embrace our tensions (Lencioni, 2002). Sometimes we might set one tension down to keep going, but we must trust that a colleague is holding that other tension up while we shift focus for a while or regain our vitality. Our Assistant Principal Mary King recently introduced a new concept in a faculty and staff meeting: the wedge that separates us. She asserted that we are

stronger together and to be aware of a wedge narrative when listening to people who ask things of us. We are a school, not a battlefield, and we will do more for our students if we are asset oriented toward each other and assume goodness in that which we and others bring to our common table.

School as a humanitarian endeavor requires that our work is motivated by justice and equity, especially in a school of innovation; STEM is a tool of inquiry and intellectual concept. Baxter is a STEM school that strives to be both a humanitarian endeavor and a place of inquiry. At this year's graduation, our commencement speaker was Phil Coupe, who founded and leads the largest solar energy company in our state, Revision Energy. He spent his lifetime carving out hope and possibility for the common good in a political and economic landscape that challenged his work for sustainability. Coupe's STEM work is deeply connected to justice and equity. He opened by saying that we achieve great things by pulling strong people together for a common cause; he asserts that when we learn what others want, we can help them achieve it and in the process achieve our own goals. As Coupe has learned, we at Baxter, a place made of diverse voices, where community matters and inclusivity is really valued, have no foes, except the wedges that scatter our efforts. Leadership, Baxter students learn, starts with listening. Through some programmatic flux, students held disappointments and hopes about our advisory program. There were feelings of anger about the decisions of school leadership around budgetary adjustments. We built a new table for discourse that involved students and leaders and, over the course of a year, developed a protocol for interviews and investigations conducted by students about advisory that would then empower them to build a professional development workshop for our educators about advisory. They had to first reorient to hold belief in best intent among all members of our community and then to listen to competing wants and needs for our advisory program. Our students turned the wedges into partnership. Through our conflicts and tensions, we learn that democratic spaces are not about agreement or an energy-less sense of peace; rather, we discover through acceptance of our diverse assets and perspectives that we have many opportunities to help our common good in building bridges of understanding and common purpose.

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Developing Voice in Middle School Through Examining Essential Questions

Buffy Cushman-Patz

SEEQS: the School for Examining Essential Questions of Sustainability

What: Public Charter Middle School

Where: Honolulu, Hawaii, USA.

Who: SEEQS currently serves a diverse population of ~180 students in grades 6, 7, and 8 (ages 10–14). Authorized to expand to high school (grades 9–12, ages 14–18).

When: Operating since August 2013

Mission: *The diverse community of SEEQS fosters a joy of learning through collaborative, interdisciplinary examination of questions essential to Hawaii's future.*

Vision: *SEEQers will be stewards of planet earth and healthy, effective citizens of the world.*

Design Principles:

- *Real-world situations and real-world contexts enable real-world learning.*

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- *Learning occurs when learners take ownership of their learning.*
- *Everyone is a teacher; everyone is a learner, all of the time.*
- *A learning environment is composed of its community members, cultural values, and physical surroundings.*
- *Improvement of an organization requires consciously collaborative participation by its community members.*

HOW DID SEEQS COME TO LIFE?

My passion for education and sustainability developed over the course of my life. The daughter of a teacher, I've always paid close attention to how people (including me) learn. An undergraduate geology major, I moved to Hawaii for graduate school in 1999, where my already strong commitment to sustainability grew even more robust as I experienced living in an island community that sees the challenges and impacts of climate change as part of our daily lives.

In the process of completing my MEd in Geology, I taught undergraduate intro-level geology courses, and I realized how much I enjoyed it. After graduate school, I began teaching in the K-12 setting. I loved the work, but was frustrated by many of the structures within all the schools I knew of—limited focus on the whole child and limited opportunity for interdisciplinary learning (which meant limited opportunity for learning about real-world challenges including sustainability).

I developed the concept of SEEQS during my year in the Harvard Graduate School of Education's School Leadership program, School Development strand. In Richard Elmore's course, we were challenged to define design principles for an ideal learning environment. In Linda F. Nathan's course, "Building a Democratic School," our tasks were very tangible: each week we designed specifics of our school model, from the weekly schedule to the annual budget to our approach to engaging with parents.





These exercises in mapping out both the big-picture philosophy and the minute details of an ideal learning environment became part of the charter application that led to SEEQS. A small group of founding board members and I submitted the charter application that same year—2012—to the Hawaii Public Charter School Commission to start a public charter secondary school in Honolulu, Hawaii, the place I call home.

WHAT IDEAS IS SEEQS BASED ON?

In the early years, SEEQS was a collection of ideas borrowed from other pedagogically aligned schools and best practices: project-based learning, arts-integration, long blocks of time for academic content courses, late-start to the school day, social-emotional learning, Advisory structures, Town Hall, restorative practices, etc. We built a lot in! All the pieces weren't exactly woven together, but they were all there. One of my mottos was "*How you spend your time is how you enact your values*" (a catchphrase I first coined while completing the *Building a Democratic School* course task of designing the weekly schedule). And the SEEQS annual and [weekly schedule](#) (now only very slightly modified from its original version) built in everything we value most in a school environment; it is a manifestation of our values. Fundamental elements of SEEQS's weekly schedule include long blocks of time for authentic work, opportunities for community involvement and for students and teachers to work and play together, and extensive time for teacher planning and collaboration.

The schedule, shown below, represents a typical week at SEEQS and the basic structure of the schedule is the same for students in all grade levels; all students enroll in an Essential Question of Sustainability (EQS) course as well as a science, math, English Language Arts (ELA), art, and history course each term.

SEEQS: the School for Examining Essential Questions of Sustainability
Sample Weekly Student Schedule

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8:30-9:15 (45 min)	Advisory / Play	Physical Activity	Late Start	Physical Activity	Advisory / Play
9:20-10:30 (70 min)	Mathematical Applications	English Language Arts	Mathematical Applications	9:30-10:40 (70 min) English Language Arts	Mathematical Applications
10:35-11:45 (70 min)	Artistic Expression	Science Explorations	Artistic Expression	10:45-11:55 (70 min) Science Explorations	Artistic Expression
11:45-12:15 (30 min)	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	11:55-12:25 (30 min) Lunch	Lunch
12:20-1:30 (70 min)	Historical Perspective	Elective	Advisory/ Town Hall/ Assembly	12:30-1:45 (75 min) Elective	Historical Perspective
1:35-3:30 (115 min)	Essential Question of Sustainability (EQS) 	Essential Question of Sustainability (EQS) 	Historical Perspective	1:50-3:00 (70 min) Essential Question of Sustainability (EQS) 	Essential Question of Sustainability (EQS) 
			Early Release		

HOW DO ALL OF THESE IDEAS FIT TOGETHER IN A SCHOOL MODEL?

Keeping all the various structures functioning well proved to be a challenge for teachers and, by extension, students and parents. They needed clarity on how all the pieces worked together. It all, of course, made sense in my brain, but in order to help others see how it all worked together, we needed a model.

With a few years and several really good minds working together, we articulated a **school model** that helped weave together the various parts. It is made up of the components below, which use the analogy of a sprout developing into a strong tree and the key elements required in order for it to thrive: rich soil, good seeds, and nourishment of the seeds in the soil.



Community: Deliberate community-building and maintenance (and restoration, when needed) create an intellectually safe learning environment and set the stage for collaborative co-learning.

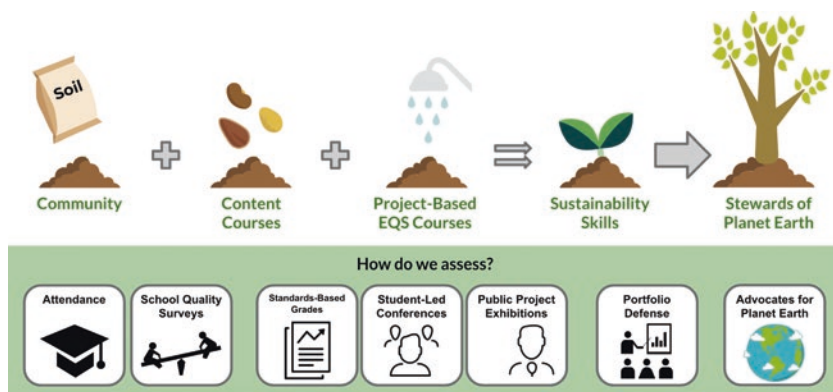
Content Courses: Academic content courses, which enable teachers to teach their passions, engage students in cultivating the knowledge and skills of the academic disciplines. Students are enrolled in English Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies, Arts, and Elective courses each semester.

Essential Question of Sustainability (EQS) Courses: Interdisciplinary project-based, inquiry-driven courses are at the heart of the SEEQS experience. Each is designed around an essential question such as “How do humans and the oceans impact each other?” or “What is required to feed our community?” They create real-world opportunities for students to get outside of the classroom and apply the knowledge and skills from content courses to impact the world around them.

SEEQS Sustainability Skills: Over the years, students grow in their ability to reason analytically, manage effectively, communicate powerfully,

collaborate productively, and think systemically—the five SEEQS Sustainability Skills. They grow into lifelong learners prepared for success beyond SEEQS.

This model helps us describe the inputs—all the things we deliberately nurture to create meaningful learning experiences for students. But how do we know what works? We build meaningful assessments of these various elements. From standards-based grades to portfolio defenses, and student-led conferences to public exhibitions, these elements were already part of the SEEQS school design. Articulating their role in assessing various parts of our school model helped us clarify how we ultimately measure whether we are on track to helping SEEQers live out the SEEQS vision of becoming *stewards of planet earth and healthy, effective citizens of the world*.



WHAT MAKES SEEQS DEMOCRATIC?

Explicit and intentional structures—many of which are invisible to the external observer—enable students and teachers to have a voice in the learning environment they are part of every day. This voice in, and ownership of, how they spend their valuable time doing meaningful work that matters is the fundamental basis of what makes SEES democratic.

When I was a student, I never felt ownership of my learning (and it never occurred to me that I should). I was a serious student who understood her job to be to absorb the information passed on to her. I rarely spoke up; I did what I was asked and did it well: I was a “straight-A student.”

In college and graduate school, I had experiences, including travel, that helped me realize that my voice did matter. By the time I became a teacher, I had a much stronger sense of my self-worth and an inclination to make meaningful contributions to the school environment I was part of. However, I didn't find the systems and structures within the schools in which I worked to be conducive to incorporating teacher voice in meaningful ways.

Thus, I designed SEEQS with structures intended to give voice to students and teachers in ways that I never experienced myself.

For students, these school-level structures include Town Hall, course selection, long blocks of time for academic content courses, standards-based grades, restorative disciplinary practices, and a student ambassadors program. At the classroom level, students have (age-appropriate) choices within our project-based learning environment.

For teachers, there is time built in for the things we value: building community (and maintaining it), co-planning courses that are co-taught, ongoing and embedded professional development, fortnightly meetings with the school leader, and weekly faculty meetings that enable collaboration on implementation of school-wide structures (student-led conferences, portfolio defenses, common advisory lessons, etc.). The value of teacher voice is also manifest through practices and protocols such as sitting in circles at faculty meetings, collaborative and transparent faculty meeting agendas with feedback structures built-in, and use of protocols to guide conversations. We also are continuously and collectively creating, revising, and referencing collaboratively edited "guidebooks" that describe the various elements of our school and how we carry them out.

I'll describe each of these briefly, though you can read more details about many of these structures at the SEEQS website, www.seeqs.org. (We share our systems openly; another of our democratic beliefs is that ideas are for sharing.)

Town Hall

Town Hall is a structure enabling students and teachers to work together to steer the school. Any member of the school community (student or staff) can propose a motion to be considered at Town Hall by the body. The meetings take place approximately once per month during our long block on Wednesdays. Students have the option to attend Town Hall or Study Hall (thus, attendance at Town Hall is voluntary); teachers and staff

take turns attending Town Hall or proctoring Study Hall. It takes two-thirds of the majority of people present to pass a motion, and every vote counts the same—student or staff²—so the stakes are *real* and the students know it. The leadership team (school leader and/or executive director) has “veto power” if a motion is passed that cannot be implemented for some reason, but we have never had to use this power. The format of the Town Hall structure, which includes turn-taking with people speaking for or against the motion, makes it so that people truly listen to each other, and they often end up changing their vote based on newly considered perspectives.

Motions that have been considered through Town Hall structure through the years have ranged from organizing a school dance to adding long-sleeved uniform options to banning single-use plastic drink containers on campus to changing the schedule so that the passing period after lunch is longer. Many Town Hall motions don’t pass—the two-thirds threshold is intentionally high—but the discussion is always robust.

Town Hall gives voice to all members of the community and allows everyone to contribute to the decision-making process at SEEQS. By building transparency and involvement in this process, our hope is that students will begin to think about how social structures come to be, gain confidence in their potential to make change, and grow into engaged citizens.

Course Selection

Most courses at SEEQS are topical in nature; e.g. instead of “seventh grade English,” course offerings might be “Mirrors and Windows” or “Dystopian Fiction” or “Writers Workshop”—all of which are multi-age, sixth to eighth grades. As such, we allow students to choose which courses they enroll in as much as our scheduling allows. Most students get to select the following courses: English Language Arts, Social Studies, Elective, Arts, EQS, and Physical Activity.

For our project-based Essential Question of Sustainability (EQS) courses, it is especially important that students get to select which course (and by expansion which team of teachers) they are particularly interested in because they spend so much time (eight hours per week) in the EQS course. EQS groups spend time on field experiences, engaging with community partners and designing and carrying out projects—so we want students to be spending time on things they are interested in and with adults

they value learning from. To that end, we do a form of “EQS course shopping” at the start of each school year, spending a few days during the EQS block and allowing students to experience a short version of the courses and the teachers before ultimately selecting their top choices for which EQS course to enroll in.

For Physical Activity, likewise, the priority outcome is for students to move their bodies and get blood flowing in the mornings, so it is important that they get a choice in how they prefer to do that. Physical Activity groups meet twice per week for 45 minutes at the start of the school day, and Physical Activity offerings range from low-intensity activities like gardening or walking to high-intensity sports like basketball or ultimate Frisbee. In addition to choosing which Physical Activity they enroll in each quarter, students get to suggest things they might like to learn or even lead themselves in upcoming quarters. As a result, we have also been able to offer skills-based Physical Activity options like Polynesian dance, Aikido, or pickleball when there are teachers, volunteer community members, or students with the expertise to lead them.

At SEEQS we believe that *how you spend your time is how you enact your values*. Every student has their own set of discrete values, and they should have a voice and choice in how they spend their time during their days, both deepening and expanding their values.

Project-Based Learning and Long Blocks of Time for Academic Content Courses

Project-based learning is a pedagogical practice common in many schools, including SEEQS. Real life is full of projects, and thus students learning through projects is a natural approach. Projects let them explore topics through a variety of perspectives, apply multiple skills at once, collaborate with peers, and so much more. Project-based learning allows students to apply the skills and tools they learn to things that matter. Voice and choice are inherent in project work, and thus project-based learning is an inherent part of our democratic school model.

Similarly, academic content courses are scheduled for 70-minute blocks. EQS courses are scheduled for 115 minutes. Longer blocks of time allow for authentic investigations, robust discussions, and meaningful learning experiences.

Standards-Based Grades

Standards-based grading is not a structure unique to SEEQS, but it is important to note the role of standards-based grades as part of our democratic school structure. Standards-based grades give students the information they need in order to learn and grow. Students' progress at SEEQS is reported using the language of "Starting, Striving, Succeeding, or Soaring" on discipline-specific content and performance standards. Work habits (e.g. "participates effectively" or "completes assignments on time") are reported separately, using the language of "Minimally, Somewhat, Mostly, or Completely" and do not count toward the assessment of whether a student has mastered the standard or not.

Compared to the nebulous and subjective A–F grading system, standards-based grades democratize the learning process and help students know what success can and should look like (as well as provide information about what it would look like to go above and beyond). They give information about specific areas of strength and growth, and they don't conflate good (or bad) habits with mastery (or lack thereof).

Restorative Disciplinary Practices

Like standards-based grading, restorative practices are not unique to SEEQS. However, it is crucial to note that in a school that values student voice so much, a top-down, one-size-fits-all disciplinary approach would not be aligned. Restorative practices, in contrast to traditional disciplinary practices, value community and teach students to self-reflect and understand the impact of their actions on each other. Much of this happens through students talking with adults and with each other; the value of student voice is inherent in restorative practices.

Student Ambassadors

Student ambassadors represent the student voice of SEEQS to our broader community. They represent us when we have visitors who would like a tour of our school or to learn about our project-based EQS courses; they co-present at our Open House Info Sessions for prospective families (and lead short campus tours for those families before the event begins); they host admitted students for a "shadow day" prior to enrollment to help them get a feel for the school before they join our campus the following

year. Additionally, if SEEQS is invited to participate in a conference, to be interviewed by the media, or to attend an event, student ambassadors are who we call on to participate.

The ambassador program is entirely voluntary. At the start of each semester, we put out a call to all students to attend an informational session during lunch to learn about the ambassadors program. Many students new to SEEQS already have a sense of the ambassadors program because they had a positive experience interacting with an ambassador before they enrolled, either through an Open House Info Session or through the shadowing experience as a prospective student. Thus, they already have a positive impression of the role of ambassadors and want to have the chance to share that warm welcome with future students, families, and guests.

Students who are interested in becoming an ambassador have a short application to complete in which they explain why they'd like to be an ambassador, and they must get signatures from teachers indicating permission to be excused from class for short periods of time to engage with visitors. In many cases, students' teachers or advisors will encourage introverted students or students who might not see themselves as ambassadors to consider becoming one. These students often become our most earnest ambassadors; having someone see their strengths often helps them recognize and appreciate them, too.

Students can volunteer to be either a class ambassador or a school ambassador. School ambassadors—almost always in pairs—lead school tours; they begin by sharing about the SEEQS model and the SEEQS schedule, and then they walk visitors through the campus, stopping at each classroom. At that point, one or more class ambassadors will approach the visitors, introduce themselves, share about the class they're in and the activity they're currently engaging in, and answer questions the visitors may have.

We hold training sessions (usually during lunch) for students to become ambassadors. In these sessions, we make sure that school ambassadors practice using the language of the school's vision, school model, and elements of the weekly schedule. We help class ambassadors practice sharing about the class and make sure they know the course name and essential question. We also help ambassadors think through what types of questions visitors most often have about SEEQS, and which details are interesting to share.

But for the most part, the training comes through practice. New school ambassadors do their first school tours with experienced school ambassadors taking the lead. Class ambassadors often begin in pairs so they can build off each other. The more experiences engaging with others they have, the better students get at articulating what they want to share.

Student ambassadors, without fail, charm everyone they engage with (including me, every time). They speak with authenticity and tell their truth in ways that only middle schoolers can. Most importantly, though, they speak with ownership of their learning experiences and a subtle pride that they are trusted with this important role of sharing about SEEQS.

The school ambassadors program is the program at our school that I am the most proud of and the one that I think teaches students the strength and power of their voice in the most long-lasting, impactful ways.

Faculty Community-Building (and Community-Maintaining) Time

The basis of any highly functional work environment is a strong sense of community and intellectual safety. It takes time to build (and maintain) these things, so we factor time for this important work both before the school year starts and throughout the school year.

At the beginning of the school year, we typically schedule seven days with faculty (and one additional day at the start of it all with just new staff) before students arrive so that we can build our own community together, collaborate, and prepare for students. One of these seven days we schedule as an off-campus retreat-type day; on this day we prioritize getting to know each other (through reflection and sharing prompts in small and medium groups), *playing* together (e.g. playing Frisbee, going hiking, swimming in the ocean, and playing board games), and doing service together. In the past we've held these retreats at sites ranging from a community farm to a North Shore beach house. The result is always a closer, tighter faculty community that has built connections that extend beyond the academic contexts.

At the end of each quarter of the school year, we reserve a paid work day without students to ensure that teachers have time to finish grades prior to a school break. On these work days, we take time to either start with a "shout-out circle" in which staff members sit in a circle taking turns sharing appreciation of and with each other or to do physical activity together. When possible, we do both. Our faculty loves to play dodgeball

and kickball; we have a competitive crew and we have so much fun (and build so much community) by getting to be silly and sweaty together without the responsibility of caring for students.

Faculty Meeting Practices and Protocols

Weekly faculty meetings are 85 minutes on Wednesday mornings. Much like long content courses allow for meaningful learning for students, longer faculty meetings—scheduled at the start of the day when teachers are fresh, not exhausted at the end of the day—allow for meaningful collaboration and the ability to maintain cohesive school-wide structures and systems for students (e.g. student-led conferences, Portfolio Defense, Advisory). Typical faculty meetings include a combination of professional development, announcements, and time to reconnect to and recalibrate ongoing school structures that all teachers implement. Most faculty meetings have multiple facilitators; the school leader sets the agenda but incorporates other staff and teacher leaders to lead various parts of the meeting in which they are experts.

The shared, continuously running document for the faculty meeting agenda plays a role in democratizing faculty meetings. All faculty members have access—before, during, and after meetings—to meeting objectives, discussion topics and notes, and hyperlinked documents.

The running agenda document includes several open-source sections: housekeeping—in which anyone can contribute notes ranging from “don’t forget to clean your stuff out of the staff workspace” to “here’s a great upcoming professional development opportunity you might want to check out”; plus/deltas—in which meeting attendees can provide feedback about things that worked well in the meeting (plusses) and suggestions for improvement (deltas) for future meetings; and suggestions for future meetings—a table at the end of the document for folks to add suggestions for topics they would like to have included on upcoming meeting agenda (e.g. “Can we revisit and calibrate on Work Habit scores?”).

Additionally, at the start of each meeting, the facilitator asks for volunteers: a time-keeper to help keep the agenda on track and a note-taker to record key points of discussion so that everyone (including those who missed the meeting) can refer back to the document later. The faculty meeting agenda document ultimately serves as a record of information discussed in meetings.

All faculty meetings begin in the same way that days begin for students: with the group sitting or standing in a circle, followed by a greeting and sharing in that circle arrangement. Greetings can be short or long, silly or serious, but by the end of the greeting every person has been acknowledged by name by one or more folks in the room. Likewise, sharing prompts can be silly or serious, and they can be random or connect to the topics on the agenda for the day, but always provide an opportunity for faculty and staff to connect with each other.

This is a crucial part of the community-maintaining we do throughout the year that fosters the collaborative work environment. The parallelism between activities for students and for teachers adds yet another dimension to the intentionality and impact of structures that enable a strong community.

Teacher Leadership Roles

Teachers are the experts in many elements of the SEEQS model, as they are the ones who directly implement them with students. Thus, having teachers who serve as these resident experts benefits the entire school and makes for a better student experience. Teacher leaders organize logistics and details for students, contribute to school-level leadership team meetings, lead professional development sessions for their peers, work from and contribute to guidebooks, and more.

Teachers who have been at SEEQS for more than a semester can apply for leadership roles; they are compensated with a stipend and in some cases additional release time. Teacher leadership roles include Portfolio Defense Lead, Advisory Lead, Student Ambassadors Lead, Physical Activity Lead, and EQS Lead. The roles and responsibilities for each are outlined in a shared document that teachers who have served in those roles in the past helped create (including determining fair compensation for the role based on estimated hours needed for it).

In the event of a change in school leadership, having teachers hold the expertise and ownership to carry out our fundamental SEEQS structures ensures that students can continue to have cohesive and high-quality experiences.

Ongoing and Embedded Professional Development

Professional development and collaboration time is built into the start of the school year (the seven days prior to students arriving, as mentioned above) and throughout the school year. Four other professional development days are scheduled throughout the school year (not counting the “work days” described above for grading and progress reporting); during these days there are opportunities to dive deeply into priority topics as determined by the school leadership team. These topics range from assessment practices to place-based learning and culturally responsive practices. Professional development may be led by the school leader, by another faculty member, or by an external consultant or community partner.

Professional development is also built into weekly faculty meetings and afternoon job-embedded professional development (additional paid hours for teachers beyond the contracted work day). More than half of faculty meetings, on average, are reserved for explicit professional development.

Co-planning and Preparation Time

Meaningful learning for students requires thoughtful and collaborative planning by teachers. As such, time is scheduled within the year and within each teacher’s work day for preparation, collaboration, and co-planning.

At the start and end of each quarter, faculty work days and professional development days enable teachers to plan, assess, and learn.

All teachers within a disciplinary content area have the same preparation period; this enables informal collaboration (as happens naturally in the faculty-shared workspace), as well as formal department meetings when they are scheduled.

EQS “pre-brief” is collaborative planning/preparation time for teaching teams who co-teach EQS. On Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays, those teams meet in their small groups from 8:00 a.m. to 8:25 a.m. (prior to students arriving) and use their time as needed to coordinate their course. During that same time block on Fridays, all the EQS teaching teams meet together; this enables all teams to be aware of what each other is doing and to collaborate/co-plan as needed. It also provides opportunities for teams to check in and co-plan structures that all EQS groups have in common, for example, EQS camp (two days of field experiences), EQS project exhibitions (end-of-semester showcases of student project work), and more.

Fortnightly Meetings with the School Leader

Regular and open lines of communication and connection with school leadership are fundamental elements of teacher voice in a democratic school community. Teachers are on the ground with students every day; they know them the best. They also have direct insights into how school structures and norms work (and don't work).

Fortnightly meetings, scheduled every two weeks for 25 minutes between each faculty member and the school leader, ensure each teacher knows that they have one-on-one time to share celebrations, concerns, ideas, and more. Agenda for these meetings is typically open-ended; discussions may include recent lessons, classroom challenges, opportunities for leadership, plans for the future, struggles at home, and so much more.

Most importantly, the frequency and regularity ensure that the school leader has a constant pulse on how each teacher is feeling and how to support and/or amplify them best. It behooves any school leader to get insights directly from teachers in order to keep a strong community and collaborative relationship between teachers and administrators.

Guidebooks

Guidebooks are digital documents shared—and collaboratively created and revised—within our school community that document how we do things. From an overarching “Faculty Guidebook” to structure-specific “Assessment Guidebook” and “EQS Curriculum Guidebook” to role-specific “Office Procedures Guidebook” or “Business Managers Guidebook,” these shared Google documents collectively describe how to run SEEQS.

Some elements of these documents are specific to our organization (e.g. reimbursement procedures), but many of them are shareable within the broader community, for those who are interested in doing something similar (e.g. Portfolio Defense Guidebook).

Each guidebook is “owned” within the SEEQS organization; most members of the community have view-access and a few have comment-access. Each document has a few members who have edit-access to make changes and updates as they are needed—in many cases, it is a teacher leader who is the primary editor. But because they are digital documents, everyone within the organization can see the most current version of them at all times.

Collectively, these structures allow **faculty** members to contribute their passions and expertise to continuously improving the school and the experiences for students (and to continuously grow and improve themselves), and for **students** to *experience* developing and using their voice and seeing the impacts of it, all within the intellectually safe community we consciously work to build and maintain.

WHAT AM I MOST PROUD OF?

We recently celebrated our tenth anniversary: SEEQS was authorized to be a Hawaii public charter school on December 13, 2012, and we held a tenth anniversary fundraiser in December 2022. Attendees included community members and donors, current and former families, and current and former board members. We also invited a few of our SEEQS alumni who had moved on to high school or college to sit at tables with guests and share about the impact of their SEEQS experiences.

Our event hosts and hostesses included none other than our current SEEQS ambassadors, who volunteered to attend the Saturday evening event and speak about their classes and SEEQS experience to guests. The ambassadors (more than 20 of them) set up around the school building in various classrooms and hallways and enthusiastically described the various structures of SEEQS—from our schedule to our arts program and portfolio defenses—to event attendees who opted to tour the school building. Guests reported utter exuberance from the ambassadors.

The alumni who attended as invited guests sat at tables with complete strangers decades older than them and held their own in conversation, sharing what they had learned from SEEQS and how it has helped them in the years since middle school. Again, the guests who engaged with these alumni reported being incredibly impressed (notably, we received more donations from guests sitting at tables with alumni).

All SEEQS faculty members were invited to attend as sponsored guests, and—with the exception of one teacher still on paternity leave for a newborn—every one of them showed up and had a fantastic time.

This is what I'm proud of. In a school where you know your voice matters—because you have had opportunities repeatedly embedded in your experience—you show up to use it. Our whole community showed up to celebrate our milestone event together. It was spectacular.

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MATTERS: Laying Groundwork for Creative Practice Rooted in Ecological and Social Awareness, Repair, and Care

Kaitlin Pomerantz

Nothing is “from scratch”.
Nothing goes “away”.

Art and design schools and programs in the US (at the high school, college, and graduate levels) attract students looking to problem-solve and envision new systems and possibilities—dreamers looking to visualize and materialize *alternatives*. Contemporary art making and cultural production is as *critical* as it is *creative*, as engaged in the business of witnessing

A full pilot version of MATTERS ran at the University of Pennsylvania’s Weitzman School of Design in the spring of 2023, with grant support from the Sachs Program for the Arts Innovation, following the writing of this essay. MATTERS programming is place-responsive and is currently Philadelphia-based, but highly adaptable to other locales. MATTERS is run by Kaitlin Pomerantz with a growing affiliated network of scholars, teachers, and site partners.

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what is wrong with *what is*, as it is proposing possibilities for how things *could be*. This said, much pedagogy within art and design fields—fine arts, architecture, urban planning, 2D and 3D design—is rooted in pedagogy that is narrow and authoritarian and does not provide latitude to truly problem-solve because it does not enable students to critically engage with—or even see—problems. For example, many students in art and design programs are gravely concerned with climate and ecological justice, yet are encouraged into creative practices that rely on ecological and social devastation, in the form of harmful material extraction and waste, and compromising labor relations. Pushing students into disciplines and mediums is justified by “tradition”, leaving little space for a critical assessment of the problems of those traditions and ignoring pressing realities that call for more careful and sustainable material practices.

My proposal for democratic school programming engages a specific topic within arts and design learning: materials. What I posit in the present chapter is an approach to learning about materials that makes space for perspectives commonly ignored (those of workers engaging with land), intentionally focuses on equity and social and ecological justice, and sets students up to confront the most pressing challenges of our time: climate change and ecological instability (caused by extraction, global transport, and consumption-driven earth-damaging and labor-exploiting practices). The programming that I offer orients art and design learners to have a greater awareness of the concerning practices that define their industries on the level of labor and land vis-a-vis materials, as well as efforts for alternative, restorative approaches. This programming relies on collaboration, interdisciplinary thinking, and critical engagement and will be oriented toward establishing new ethical frameworks in creative practice, toward a greater “common good”. This programming is designed to serve existing schools and design programs in higher education and could also serve high school students and schools with focuses on the visual arts.

My own personal background as a multi-material artist and arts educator in higher (and previously, elementary) education, and background in land-and-sea work (farming and marine aquaculture: oyster growing), as well as my exposure to waste industries (via my involvement with RAIR Philly, an arts organization and residency based in an active recycling center¹)—and the child of parents who worked in the textiles industry in the waning days of domestic manufacturing—has lend me particular insight

¹ See Footnote 3 for more on RAIR Philly.

into the nexus of the arts, materials, land, labor, waste, and education. This complex of experiences propels me toward envisioning possibilities for more circular, resourceful, and respectful approaches to creative practice and pedagogy. These ideas draw from ample precedents and practitioners whose visions of art-making and arts learning stand up as ethical arcs toward which we must endeavor to bend ourselves and our institutions.

WHAT?

MATTERS is a site-focused arts education program that connects artists to materials and materials to land and labor. Its programmatic objective is to lay the groundwork for a creative practice rooted in ecological and social awareness, repair, and care.

Programming focuses on partnerships with existing schools—art and design programs at institutions of higher and secondary education—and sites of industry and creative materials production. For that reason, the format of the offerings correspond with the cycles and structures of the partnering schools. MATTERS classes, workshops, and varied-format learning experiences act as a bridge between students in the arts, design, and creative fields, the materials that define their fields of practice, and the sites, sources, and labor and creators of those materials.

MATTERS emerges in response to ecological and social urgency under untenable and inequitable systems of extraction, and it seeks to empower artists and designers to solve problems and create with care. Attending to deficits in prevailing Western art and design pedagogy around acknowledging waste and consumption, programming prioritizes approaches that favor reuse, adaptive strategies, and regenerative design. Coursework is both conceptual and practical and includes experiential learning as well as contextual and site-based engagement.

How?

Students and instructors will work together to build a picture of how materials are sourced, processed, and essentially *created* today; how earthen matter becomes material through processes of extraction, refinement, shipping, and other labors. Once students have an overview of the systems and mechanisms at play around contemporary materials, they will identify specific materials crucial to their fields. They will study those materials in depth: from the source of the material itself, to the processes

and labor involved in the creation and manufacturing of the material, to the methods and sites of the materials' byproducts and disposal. Students will engage with concepts such as waste-lead design, discard studies, upcycling, regenerative land relations, and look to TEK (traditional ecological knowledge) and decolonial praxis. They will engage with hands-on making that gives a sense of materiality beyond academic study, site visits and close engagement with place, reading and research, discussion, presentation, and creation of synthesizing “deliverables” suited to each student and topic. Discovery of, and awareness around, “problems”, is not the end point; rather, these truths will lead to the exploration of alternative structures, systems, and ways of working with material and envisioning material itself.

Much of this discovery, observation, interrogation, and visioning of alternatives will take place outside of the classroom: in the origin sites of various materials (e.g. a sand mining area of South New Jersey where silica extraction takes place for the production of glass and concrete), waste sites, and historic and active artisanal and industrial spaces (e.g. Historic Rittenhousetown—North America's first paper mill, located in Germantown, Philadelphia). Students will be tasked with on-site exercises rooted in observation, documentation, and slow looking, fostering a deep sense of connection with place.²

In a pilot round in the spring of 2023, MATTERS will be offered to students at the Weitzman School of Design at the University of Pennsylvania. The class is open to graduates and undergraduates from fine arts, design, architecture, landscape architecture, urban planning, and the wider university. The course will hold a traditional 14-week format and partner with visual artists and a waste industry expert. The course description is as follows:

MATTERS: Connecting Arts + Design to Materials, and Materials to Labor + Land

How does *matter* transform into *material*, and back again? What hidden labor, sites, social and ecological costs and processes that go into the production of a “blank” canvas and other “raw” materials? And why—for art-

² Observational exercises draw inspiration from the following: “Slow Looking” pedagogy of Shari Tishman, artist Robert Smithson's evidentiary looking and site/non-site practices, architect/educator Chris Taylor's immersive field practices, Rabindranath Tagore's Shantiniketan, Sister Mary Corita's looking exercises, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's *Land as Pedagogy*.

ists, designers, architects, preservationists, creative educators, builders, and anyone working with materials—do these questions *matter*?

This course connects arts and design learners to considerations, sites, and cycles around production and disposal of the defining materials of their creative fields (ex. paper, wood, glass, pigment, “the internet”), laying groundwork for creative practice rooted in social and ecological awareness, repair and care. A hybrid research seminar, field exploration, and studio investigation, the structure of this course alternates between reading/response/research, field trips and guest visitors (including a partnership affiliation with RAIR Philly³), and time for responsive “making” and material experimentation/synthesis.

In this course, students will collaboratively define key terms and concerns around material sustainability, discard studies, land and labor relations vis-a-vis creative work. Students will experience local sites of material extraction, production and disposal (through approx 5 field trips taking place during class time). Students will formulate individual or group questions around a specific material, leading to a final independent project, and class exhibition. This course will engage students in forming a material ethics to guide future creative work.

A sample unit from MATTERS programming, from its first pilot round in Philadelphia, gives a more vivid sense of the approach and pedagogy:

MATTERS SAMPLE UNIT:

Paper: from Tree to Trash

INTRO:

Paper is a basic unit of art and arts education. It is the “blank” substrate upon which creations begin. We think of paper as an analog technology, disposable, recyclable—a renewable resource, and a casual resource. In this unit, we will examine the history of paper, the past and present sites and means of its production, and the methods of its disposal and re-use.

GROUNDING CONSIDERATIONS/GUIDING TEXTS:

“50% of all paper ends up as garbage (in fact, paper accounts for fully half the discards in US landfills).”—Heather Rogers, *Gone Tomorrow*

“Material stories are origin stories.”—Kathryn Yussoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*

“Implosions” concept—Donna Haraway
Paper history—Mark Kurlansky, *Paper*

MATTERS SAMPLE SCHEDULE:**SCHEDULE:**

Lessons are centered around visits to four sites:

Site Visit 1: Historic Rittenhouse Town

Historic Rittenhouse Town, sometimes referred to as Rittenhouse Historic District, encompasses the remains of an early industrial community which was the site of the first paper mill in British North America. The mill was built in 1690 by William Rittenhouse and his son Nicholas on the north bank of Paper Mill Run (Monoshone Creek) near (and now within) Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Site Visit 2: Revolution Recovery + D’Orrazio Paper Waste Centers

Revolution Recovery, dumpster rentals and recycling service

John D’Orrazio and Sons, paper waste facility

Site Visit 3: Artist/Papermaker Studio Visit

Site Visit 4: Industrial Papermaking

WHY?

The triad of Western aesthetic theory—*subject, form, and content*—is missing its fourth leg: *material*. In most non-Western and even pre-capitalist Western artistic traditions, material was central to the making and meaning of art. And yet, contemporary art and design teaching glosses over these land and labor practices and connections, directing learners to the nearest Dick Blick (a popular “art supply” store in the US) instead of showing foundational sources and systems, people and places, that make materials happen and art and design possible. As theorist Donna Haraway articulates, “It matters what matters we use to think other matters with” (Haraway, D. 2016).

We know that architecture could not exist without stone and clay quarries, painting without pigmented dirt, textiles without plant and animal fibers, windows without sand and fire, and even the humble pencil without trees and coal. We know that millions of humans were and are involved in material extraction and production, and yet their labors—and exploitations—go mostly unmentioned in the historic, and even present-day discourse, around art and design. And we know that many cultures still prize

their land and matter knowledges and do not separate them from art. What would it mean to bring these realities into view within contemporary art pedagogy?

In a [survey](#) across creative sectors that I conducted as part of my graduate research at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, arts practitioners, students, teachers, and other cultural producers expressed an understanding of the connections between art materials and:

- decolonization and restoring relationship
- land politics and ethics
- issues of sustainability, waste, and reuse
- financial viability
- access, labor, and health

These same survey-takers noted an absence of resources around learning about these intersections and made a plea to learn more.

My proposal for democratic educational programming is a response to this plea, which I have heard echoed in my students and colleagues throughout my 15-year career as an artist, land-based practitioner, and art teacher in higher, elementary, and adult education. The proposed educational initiative attends to these facets of lack in our current arts pedagogy, centering a pedagogy of connection between practitioner, material, labor, and place that can be flexibly integrated into current frameworks of arts teaching and learning. It is a democratic project in that it makes information accessible that is otherwise obscured and thereby allows students—future practitioners—to make informed choices and necessary adjustments to their fields. It is a program that believes in the capacity for individual and collective problem-solving and the capacity of art and design to attend to and reverse the devastations of colonialism, consumption, extraction, labor exploitation, and more. Orienting *matter* at the heart of arts learning, and teaching can support creative practitioners to become the visionaries, ethical compasses, and connective tissue that this ailing world so desperately needs.

WHO?

It may be helpful to think more specifically about who would benefit from this programming. To do so, I have created some sample student profiles below, based on students I have worked with in the past. (Pronouns for the students are *he*, *she*, and *they*.)

A college freshman steps into a drawing class and beholds unfamiliar tools and contraptions: wooden easels, Masonite drawing boards, low benches, clamp lights. They pick up a syllabus and rifle through the pages, landing on the Materials List—a litany of intriguing items: tortillons, kneaded erasers, vine charcoal, bristol board, all to be purchased at the local art supply store.

A high schooler in an architecture class creates a maquette of a pavilion out of balsa wood, designed with the intention to be used as a forum for hosting discussions about climate change. She is asked to source the materials necessary to realize this design. She researches wood species and learns about deforestation in Brazil.

A ceramics instructor teaches about the durability of fired clay: the way that it can withstand forces of time better than any material, including metal, except for plastic. She explains how clay—ceramic—has helped us to learn the stories of past civilizations. When she teaches students to throw, the students are eager to fire all of their creations—no matter how wonky. The teacher wishes she knew more about where the clay came from, so that students could make more informed choices about what they wish to fire and what to let melt back into usable earth.

An aspiring fashion designer makes clothing from upcycled garments from thrift stores, using natural dyes like onion skin and marigold. A friend takes him to a store where there is a whole section of neon fabrics. He wonders how they make the fabric so bright.

A drawing major switches to web design because his parents say it will be more lucrative and because he loves to travel and not be encumbered by materials, and he imagines that working digitally is more ecologically friendly. He notices an article about underwater cables used to power the internet and wonders why none of his teachers ever talk about what the internet is actually made of.

DEMOCRATIC LEARNING

In a world increasingly imperiled by authoritarianism and restrictions on independent thinking and critical inquiry, it is necessary to push for opportunities for new democratic learning spaces and also to re-envision *existing*

educational spaces toward democratic learning ideals. Higher education in the US, in particular, is deeply afflicted by the stronghold of bureaucracy and monetary incentives that reproduce oppressive, exclusive, individualistic, and exploitative conditions.

The programming that I envision is deliberately lacking in its own autonomous structure, that is to say, it is not a *school* or even a definitive program. It is a flexible and responsive cluster of programming defined around a clear ethos or—in the words of educational theorist Steve Seidel—an *animating core* (Seidel, S. 2013). It works with existing schools, attending to their deficits in traditional art and design learning, encouraging students to re-envision it from the inside out, and setting a precedent and offering models for teachers within those school communities. While current instantiations of MATTERS work within existing academic structures, future iterations—once relationships are established—might find different forms to act better as interdisciplinary bridges and to meet more students. The structure of MATTERS aims to be mycelial (or as aforementioned scholar Haraway says, “tentacular”)—and also symbiotic, riding on the back of existing structures to imbue them with necessary nutrients while making use of those structures to access students who are rigorous and curious.

This programming is itself the product of democratic expression and results directly from students’ shows of dissatisfaction and limitation, and their demands to dig deeper and look at material conditions from the ground up, to make new meaning together rather than inherit old half-truths. It also responds to their wishes to move beyond the bounds of their institutions and to connect with communities, land, place, and one another. I express gratitude to every student I have worked with at the various schools where I have taught as a lecturer and critic and to the high schools and community education programs where I have worked as a teaching artist. Students are teachers, and they are responsible for summoning this framework to actualize the tools, conditions, and communal mindset to respond to the unpredictable conditions that lay ahead.

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The Story of Artist Proof Studio and the Building of a Democratic Art School in South Africa

Kim Berman

INTRODUCTION

Artist Proof Studio (APS) was founded when Nelson Mandela was released from his 26-year incarceration, which began a national challenge for building democracy in South Africa.

I had been out of the country for seven years, and in 1990 on my return, I invited Nhlanhla Xaba as a co-founder in creating a printmaking center called Artist Proof Studio. He invited artists he knew who had explored printmaking at a Swedish mission school called Rorke's Drift, one of the few open and non-racial schools for artists during the apartheid years. The ten artists who joined us became founding members. We met regularly to develop and imagine a "free space" to discover and imagine what a democratic future could be through printmaking. We believed printmaking provided a rich metaphor for democratic practice to explore

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collaborative processes. Printmaking techniques such as linocut, screen-printing, and etching played a historical role in resistance art in the anti-apartheid movement, and because of its accessibility and affordability could enhance opportunities for livelihoods and redress in a democratic social environment. Our founding members were engaged in various community centers and invited youth from surrounding township art centers to join our printmaking classes, including Soweto, Katlehong, and Alexandra. One of the first collaborative projects paired young artists and students to work with the elders as mentors in creating group artworks for the newly opened Legislature and democratic institutions in the early 1990s.

Artist Proof Studio played an important role alongside other cultural organizations at the time in generating an explosion of creative production in celebrating the promise of a democratic future. We were situated in the hub of the cultural district of Newtown, alongside theater, dance, and craft groups that shared this remarkable historical moment of creativity. Progressive organizations and institutions who wanted to image themselves as part of the new South Africa acquired and hung Artist Proof Studio prints on their walls, and in this way, a kind of printmaking renaissance emerged. Decorative flower and European Impressionist poster prints were replaced by affordable hand-made linocuts, monoprints, and collographs¹ by young black artists. By imagining a different future from the oppressive regime that had persisted in South Africa, artists could earn an income. I joined the University of Johannesburg in the mid-1990s and invited my (then) all-white students to participate in workshops at Artist Proof Studio and collaborate on a project called *Volatile Alliances*. We proposed the *Volatile Alliances* theme as part of the education program, leading to South Africa's first international Johannesburg Biennale in 1995. The biennale took place in Newtown and gave South African artists an international platform for the first time due to former cultural sanctions against apartheid. *Volatile Alliances* was a theme that explored and challenged various aspects of South African history and the experience of racial segregation. The collaborative project merged identities of white university students and township-based artists through dynamic creative

¹Linocuts are relief prints carved from affordable linoleum floor tiles; monoprints can be transferred from any available matrix such as plastic or board; and collographs are generated from printing plates made from cardboard and textures that have been glued onto a plate, sealed, and rubbed with ink, before transferring onto paper using an etching press.

practices. Students pieced together composites of their portraits to find unlikely alliances. The participatory projects and practices from the early 1990s have remained the guiding values that build our mission to create a collaborative and democratic arts education (see Images 34.1 and 34.2)

This collective book project invites global responses to a series of questions that deepen an understanding of what it means to build democratic

Image 34.1 “Ubuntu Tree”: collaborative linocut print by the APS collective (2005)

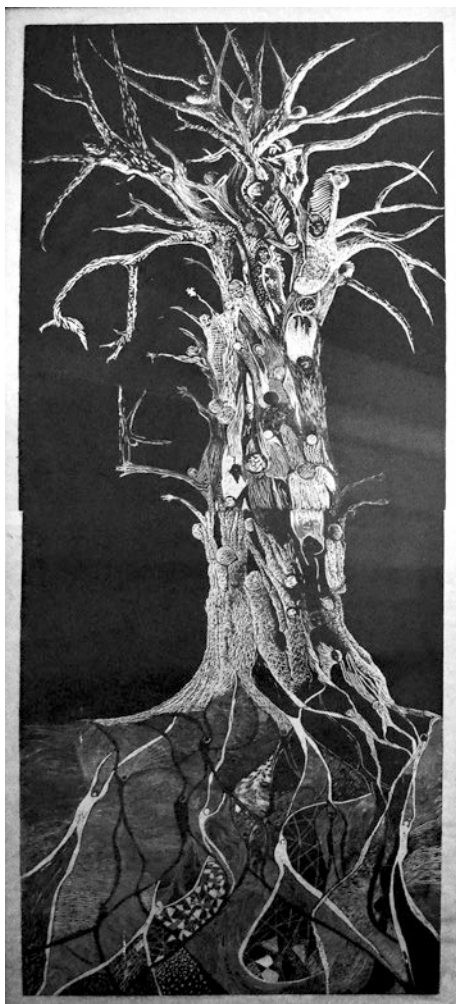




Image 34.2 The Collaborative collograph print by the APS collective: “Celebrating Arts and Culture” for the Gauteng Legislature (1994)

schools. The context of exploring democratic education and critical pedagogy is contested and may differ in approaches between the global north and the global south. “Southern knowledges” have been repressed by colonialism and settler culture and are currently being reconstituted (Mignolo, 2009). One of the ways educators have addressed this in a South African context is to be open to the ways we teach and the application of African words and concepts as frameworks for learning to move toward constituting African or global southern perspectives in communicating an African-centered vision for classes. For example, at Artist Proof Studio, we use the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of humans to establish a common vision and alignment. This search for a common vision provides the context for understanding Artist Proof Studio as a democratically grounded art school.

Reflecting on the meaning of democratic schooling in the South African context requires a holistic and contextual understanding of one of the most unequal societies in the world. South Africa has one of the most progressive constitutions that advocates the pillars of social justice and

equal rights for all and offers opportunities for transformation and redress from decades of human rights abuses. The constitution calls for the regeneration of the education systems that critically engage with understanding human rights. However, the practices of South African education fall far short. During apartheid and throughout the colonial era, education was used to erase heritage, oppress, and domesticate black South Africans most evidently through the enactment of what was known as the repressive Bantu education system.

Because of the continued human rights abuses in South Africa, the economic and lived experiences of many South Africans are focused on immediate survival. Corruption and state capture have led to the potential collapse of the South African economy and its environmental management. Therefore, educators must understand what future sustainability might look like for most youth and what is needed to achieve it. The social issues are intimately related to land, which is still one of the most contentious issues in South Africa. In addition, the broader society must campaign to raise the living conditions of *all* South Africans to a humane level and maintain greater social cohesion. These are not small issues and are vitally important for all educators to consider.

UBUNTU AS A UNIFYING VALUE

On a small scale, in its vision and mission, Artist Proof Studio embodies the principles of Ubuntu (I am through you). The Xhosa proverb that best describes it is *umntu ngumntu ngabantu* (meaning I am because we are). Artist Proof Studio embodies the Ubuntu philosophy in aesthetics and organizational values as part of its understanding of democracy. Ubuntu is included in our mission and vision statement, and all students are orientated to understand that when they join Artist Proof Studio, they walk into an Ubuntu space. This African philosophy of humanity has deep roots and values in community care, respect, and empathy. Both former President Nelson Mandela and former Archbishop Desmond Tutu foregrounded this principle to build cohesion during the birth of democracy in South Africa and as the value underlying the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Ubuntu is not just an abstract concept. It permeates every aspect of African life and is expressed in collective singing, pain, dancing, expressions of grief, celebrations, sharing, and compassion. Ubuntu is recognized as a tolerance and compassion philosophy and embraces forgiveness.

Ubuntu fosters safe and supportive spaces for self-expression that encompass respect, empathy, and community well-being. While there are many understandings of Ubuntu, employing it as an ethical guide “encourages individuals to think of themselves as inextricably bound to others, discouraging people from seeking their good without regard for, or to the detriment of, others and the community” (Munyaka & Motlhabi, 2009: 71–72). Ubuntu requires a fundamental move away from considering self-interest to situating one’s interest within the broader community’s interests. This resituating of self-interest echoes the drive of inserting “public work” as finding the “soul” in higher education (Megisso, 2015: 37).

Linda F. Nathan, founder and principal of Boston Art Academy (BAA), partnered with Artist Proof Studio and served as a mentor in facilitating and developing Habits of Mind workshops. The workshops explored which habits and values enhance learning capacities and help fulfill social justice goals (Nathan, 2009). First coined by John Dewey in the early twentieth century and popularized in progressive American schools, the term “habits of mind” is a framework for unifying the values of a school. The related acronym at Artist Proof Studio is “*I SEE-U*,” which stands for “innovation, self-awareness, engagement, excellence and **Ubuntu**.” By promoting values of excellence through possibility, innovation, and internal and external engagement, Artist Proof Studio encourages artists to push beyond printmaking boundaries and find their own visions, while deriving inspiration through collaboration. As a collective, we contend that the arts are well placed to enact and promote these values as art can open minds to new approaches and allow for innovative thinking and more collaborative interaction. In order to achieve this, students and graduates are supported in developing their agency and leadership capacities.

IS DEMOCRACY A DREAM DEFERRED?²

In *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred*, Mark Gevisser (2007) wrote that former President Mbeki’s concern in 1998 “was the crisis of expectation of black South Africans awaiting liberation and who now found themselves on the brink of explosion.” Mbeki’s warning was that if these two nations (black and white) were not reconciled economically and politically,

² Mark Gevisser quotes Langston Hughes’ 1951 poem, *The Dream Deferred*: “What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up ... like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore....”

the dream of equality and liberation promised by our constitution would explode.

South Africa is still fighting the historical economic and educational inequalities that face our students post-democracy in South Africa. Wide-ranging corruption and greed (known in South Africa as “State capture” perpetrated by the Zuma and Gupta families) has led to the failure and collapse of the government and the ruling elite, drifting further away from principles of reality, honesty, and accountability. Corrupt leaders, out of touch with the majority, have led to deepened inequality and unemployment. As a brief indication of the vastness of the challenges, a few statistics can be instructive in situating the context. In 2015, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) ranked South Africa’s education system in the bottom two out of seventy-six countries. They reported that 58% of children could not read fluently and with comprehension at the end of Grade Four. In addition, it is estimated that only between 5% and 10% of black and mixed-race young people in South Africa complete university.³

South Africans can no longer look to the government and the authorities to provide a moral compass of leadership. However, the principles founding our democracy are still firmly entrenched in our constitution and are vigorously defended by many citizen-led organizations and NGOs. While the education system is also in crisis, creative approaches to skill building across types of work and business must be required. This mission has become the urgent work of Artist Proof Studio and many progressive arts organizations bridging the gap for accessible tertiary arts training in a non-governmental space.

WHAT DO STUDENTS NEED TO KNOW?

In this book, an opportunity is presented as a question about how to explore creating a relationship between poverty and hope and imagination. Some of the students who attend Artist Proof Studio come from both educationally and economically challenged situations. Most students pay a small registration fee and receive a subsidy through funding or patron fees. Some individuals rely on the small stipend they receive from

³The *Reviews of National Policies for Education in Southern Africa* report may be accessed on this link: <http://www.oecd.org/southafrica/reviewsofnationalpoliciesforeducation-southafrica.htm>.

Artist Proof Studio for transport and materials as their only source of income. Living conditions for some students are enormously challenging, particularly students who travel from rural communities and find themselves sharing a room with five or six people in desperate circumstances. Despite the significant artistic skills that secured them a place at Artist Proof Studio, literacy and numeracy levels vary. Some students are at a severe disadvantage due to their sub-standard school education. Schooling has continued to deteriorate in the poorly functioning school system in South Africa.

The learning program at Artist Proof Studio draws on the Freirean principle of “practice of freedom,” how men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (Richard Shaull, in Paulo Freire, 2003). Funds of knowledge are the assets students bring on entering Artist Proof Studio. The focus of art-making is on finding voice to honor their stories. The strength and sustainability of an art school, somehow surviving and thriving in an uncertain political and funding climate, is the great value of indigenous knowledge and the wealth of visual stories. Students are encouraged to find a visual language to tell stories. The success of the education program is about nurturing voice. Visual storytelling and expression allow us to shape what is possible through imagination and are part of the process. Many students suffer extreme despair and anxiety, having lost their parents or family members to gender-based violence or the coronavirus, and in that process, they lost their anchors to stability and security. Nonetheless, the students have retained their agency to imagine and visualize a different reality as a tool to shape hope for the future. The philosophy of interconnectedness requires listening and responding to our students. Artist Proof Studio challenges its graduate artists with paying it forward as leaders and agents of change. In some situations, successful alums are seduced by the marketplace after financial success and do not look back.

The influence of community engagement and collaboration forms one of the pillars in shaping education at Artist Proof Studio and at the University of Johannesburg, where I am a full-time educator. Collective and collaborative relationships provide examples of shaping democratic education. One recent example is an activist campaign to support vulnerable artists through the COVID-19 lockdown period.

A more recent example of a project that formed part of a broader campaign can be found in the works that students produced during the lockdown period of the coronavirus pandemic. The Lockdown Collection

(TLC) was active for eighteen months (from March 2020 to September 2021). The collection started as a response campaign to the COVID-19 crisis and evolved into a pedagogical strategy—to turn the pandemic into a learning experience. The strategy prompted artists to record the moment of the global catastrophe and to imagine a new and more socially and ecologically just world, one that visualizes ways to build the future for the next generation.⁴

The Lockdown Collection became a campaign by artists for artists, successful artists contributed works, and thousands of dollars were raised to support vulnerable artists. Artist Proof Studio students were invited to create a series of visual conversations in response to the devastating impact of the lockdown and their hopes for a safe future. During the hard lockdown, communication took place via cell phone calls and text. Few Artist Proof Studio students had Wi-Fi access, and most needed data and smartphones to respond. Many Artist Proof Studio students live in dire poverty, so funds were raised to purchase smartphones for students who did not have their own, and a set amount of data was loaded onto sixty students' phones to enable connectivity with their teachers.

Some remarkable images and stories emerged that build on resilience and imagination to conceive new ways of seeing. The stories by the student artists call on educators to be participatory and inclusive as a fundamental aspect of being human, evoking alternative visions in collaboration with others. Their prints and drawings express instability, despair, anger, and optimism. The artworks communicate the deep knowledge of the devastating physical effects of global warming, losses, and trauma from violence and illness to creative expressions of hope and resilience⁵ (Artist Proof Studio 2020) (see Image 34.3).

The Lockdown Collection uses arts and arts education networks, as well as social media platforms, to encourage eligible students to apply for a bursary to support their continued studies in visual art. William Kentridge, one of the most renowned and globally celebrated South African artists, partnered with the TLC and provided a series of text-based artworks that were printed in editions of fifty works each and challenged responsiveness from both students and art collectors. Sales of Kentridge's

⁴See the TLC student portfolio: <https://www.thelockdowncollection.com/student-collection>.

⁵See the students' Lockdown Portfolio, the Green Recovery Portfolio, and the Gender-Based Violence Portfolio (APS, 2020; TLC, 2021).

Image 34.3 Example of student image by Jason Langa “Greener Pastures” (2021) and narrative from The Lockdown Collection (TLC) (see Berman, 2022)



Oh to Believe in Another World artwork and his previously donated lockdown print *Weigh All Tears* raised almost \$60,000. The money was used to award bursaries to eligible art students. The campaign was so successful that it was repeated in the winter of 2022 with additional works by Kentridge to support a total of 120 art students in need (see Image 34.4a, b).

Much has been written on the pedagogies of possibility that foster hope rather than hopelessness. In *Awakening Democracy Through Public Work: Pedagogies of Empowerment*, Harry Boyte (2018) builds on the principles of public work and citizen politics to shape public achievement through “active citizenship and an understanding of agency as freedom.” The core values of social justice education are grounded in lived experiences and interconnectedness. This interconnected approach influences a critical



Image 34.4 (a) *Oh to Believe in Another World*, William Kentridge (2021). (b) Signed limited editions of digital prints donated to the TLC by William Kentridge to raise funds for art students (Artist Proof Studio 2020)

pedagogy for a more human-centered, caring approach, and this became more evident during the pandemic through the contribution of artwork to create greater awareness of the impact of the pandemic and its success in raising over R3m (\$150,000) to support hundreds of vulnerable artists and art students in South Africa.

CONCLUSION

We need to listen to our students. Educators can provide optimal conditions for empathetic connections with students and facilitate these expressions by creating safe spaces that enable dreams to be actualized. The anxiety and fear of not knowing are widespread due to unstable conditions such as the pandemic climate change and global instability can cause people to experience consistent and shifting uncertainty. The arts have been extensively recognized as supporting mental well-being during this period.

Through this dialogical and reciprocal relationship, people feel empowered to act in ways that enhance society and are encouraged to contribute to a better world. The example of the dialogical co-creative aspect of The Lockdown Collection art campaign is a valuable lesson in this strategy (see Berman, 2022).

As proposed in my book *Finding Voice: A Visual Arts Approach to Engaging Social Change* (Berman, 2017: 4), the development of

individual agency is supported by the capacities of voice, resilience, dreaming, imagination, and engaging the creative process. Individual agency activates the process of individual and social change. The visual arts provide a voice that can examine injustice and allow creativity and vision to inform the construction of new personal, organizational, and communal relationships.

Transformative leadership in this context relates to Ganz's framing of leadership from the perspective of a "learner"—one who has learned to ask the right questions—rather than that of a "knower"—one who thinks they know all the answers (Ganz, 2009). Artist Proof Studio uses multiple processes to shape how artists can discover their capacities to be creative voices for change and the roles they can assume as agents of change. My book *Finding Voice* (2017) expands on many examples of this.

South Africa's developing democracy needs active citizens who can model and teach values of equality, dignity, liberty, and social justice. Artist Proof Studio believes that leadership lessons, public engagement, social responsibility, human rights, and empowerment must be part of an artist's education and training and are essential to counter the dominance of material values in society. Artist Proof Studio demonstrates and instills a desire among students and artists to address and innovate around social inequities and complex problems. Since its inception in 1991, Artist Proof Studio has engaged the community through its various public arts campaigns, such as Paper Prayers for AIDS awareness, which has reached thousands of people throughout South Africa. Its model has spawned numerous printmaking workshops, self-supporting artist-entrepreneurs, and art-based engagements for community development by Artist Proof Studio graduates across the country. Organizational leaders, educators, and students must heed "the call to exhibit moral courage, consistently striving to balance critique with promise" (Shields, 2014: 30). Community-engaged arts education supports building active citizens and agency for developing facilitative environments. In these ways, hope and imagination can envision a more democratic and socially just future.

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Recess in a Learning Landscape: An Opportunity for the Development of Democratic Skills

Ángela Ibáñez and Marcial Huneeus

*I saw children laughing whom I had never seen laugh before,
and that motivates us to promote playing at recess.*

*We want them to be happy at school;
that helps to build community.*

—Teacher from Escuela Española, Valparaíso, Chile

Patio Vivo is a non-profit organization that seeks to make a significant contribution to innovate in education and to increase the physical and socioemotional well-being of students by creating Learning Landscape in kindergarten and school grounds in Chile. For more information, please visit www.patiovivo.cl.

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Recess is usually understood as a time between classes for students to rest and play with their classmates. Likewise, it also represents a break for teachers. Traditionally, schools do not plan recess time or activities in the schoolyard, since these have not been conceived as instances of learning. Nevertheless, for many students, recess is one of the most important moments of the day: it is the time when they learn how to build and be part of a community. Recess can be a space full of learning. Children share with their friends, create relationships with students from other grades, and acquire a series of socioemotional skills through play. Students connect and communicate to resolve conflict. They develop autonomy by making their own decisions without depending so much on adults. Furthermore, they learn to persevere to achieve goals and overcome challenges. In other words, recess is a unique opportunity for the socioemotional, physical, and cognitive development of skills in children and adolescents.

There are many risks associated with not giving recess the value it has. Due to urban insecurity in Chile, most families don't engage in a culture of play nor do they have time or places to play. Hence, school recess is the main outdoor playtime for many students. In our country, schoolyards are usually flat areas made of concrete where some students play soccer and many others stand around the perimeter, either watching those who are playing, looking at their cell phones, or walking from side to side. Faced with serious problems of bullying which may generate violence and school dropout (Fierro & Carvajal, 2019), the schoolyard needs to be treated purposefully not to become a space of conflict and violence (ENVAE, 2014). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated things: play time decreased considerably, resulting in children presenting greater irritability, anger, and intolerance (Unicef et al., 2021). This lack of free and active outdoor play has a negative impact in the socioemotional, physical, and cognitive development of children (Gray, 2016). Finally, another area of concern is the exponential growth of child overweight rates: in Chile, 53% of students are overweight or obese (JUNAEB, 2023), which closely relates to the lack of physical activity.

FROM THE CONCRETE SCHOOLYARD TO A LEARNING LANDSCAPE

At Patio Vivo, we see recess as a moment for students to be free to decide what to do, how to do it, and with whom. We believe this freedom and autonomy are fundamental for their development as citizens of a democratic society. Hence, we want the schoolyards to be safe spaces where all students can express themselves and purposefully develop social and leadership abilities. That is why we transform schoolyards to Learning Landscapes, which we define as places where students develop social, physical, and emotional skills through outdoor play (see Image 35.1). For eight years, we have transformed more than 80 schoolyards in Chile, reaching more than 33,000 students. These are some of the main findings we have, and the reasons why we believe recess and schoolyards are an ideal space for students to learn to live together in a democratic and diverse society.

The schoolyard is usually flat, rough space, and is used only during recess when the movement of students is usually chaotic. As a Learning Landscape, the schoolyard presents different layers, structures, and textures, so the movement of students can be organized according to their different interests and personalities. A Learning Landscape space allows

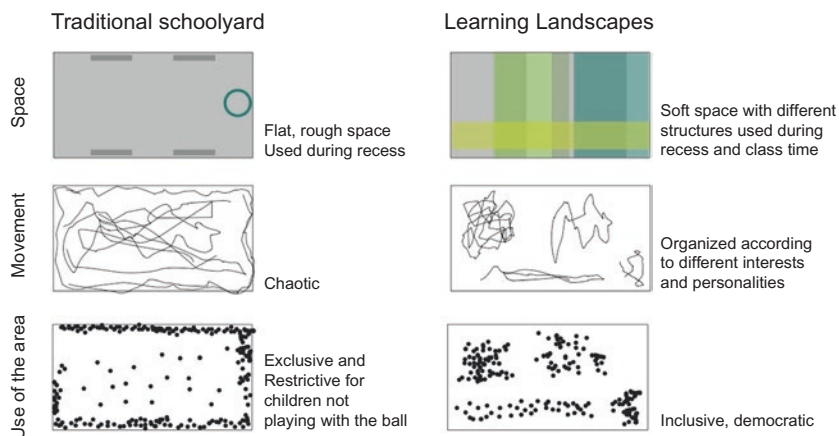


Image 35.1 Traditional schoolyards versus Learning Landscapes. (Credits: Patio Vivo Foundation)

everyone to have their place and express themselves in the playground. As a result, there is room for those who seek challenging play, quiet play, and movement play, so that children and adolescents find their place for different activities in the playground, validating the diversity of their personalities. Likewise, the use of the space goes from being exclusive and restrictive to a shared, inclusive, and democratic environment.

SCHOOLYARDS AS A THIRD TEACHER

Working with Learning Landscapes as a *third teacher* can promote actions in students and transmit ideas. This concept was developed by Loris Malaguzzi, who states that the first teacher is the teachers; the second are the children themselves, who learn from their peers; and the third is the space, which invites them to play, explore, and discover.

In Patio Vivo, we want to ensure that all children have a place to live and experience democratic values such as inclusion, a sense of belonging, and the acceptance of personal differences. We design simple geometric shapes that encourage students' movement and creativity through games created by themselves. When thinking about the design of public spaces that make room for encounters and an open democratic community, Jan Gehl (2014) suggests that spaces should have attractive fixed structures that provide an adequate setting for daily life. Space should also be flexible, so that the same fixed structure responds to different uses and provides an opportunity for brief events that occur at certain times. A Learning Landscape uses *fixed*, *flexible*, and *brief* as key attributes to support the full development of students.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF GAMES IN A LEARNING LANDSCAPE

Patio Vivo promotes democratic values primarily through free play, active play, risky play, and in-contact-with-nature play.

Free Play refers to the type of play that is created by children without adult mediation (Gray, 2016). When children play freely, they explore the environment, discover their own interests, and make their own decisions. By playing in this way, they learn how to make friends, how to organize themselves, and how to resolve their conflicts on their own. Decision-making, conflict resolution, and autonomy are key skills to develop in a democratic society.

Active Play refers to the type of play that involves movement, physical activity, and coordination (Hanscom, 2016). Jumping, hanging from ropes, or crossing crouched across a tunnel activate the vestibular and proprioceptive systems. The first one is related to the body's sense of movement in space and is linked to orientation, safety, posture, balance, a stable visual field, coordination of movements, and alertness. The second one allows control of body position and movement, so that children can plan and execute movements smoothly and in a coordinated manner. Active play develops confidence and freedom of expression from within the body.

Risky play refers to the type of play that allows children to test themselves, learn to be brave and understand risk, while developing self-regulation to assess what they can do and how they can do it (Gill, 2007). For instance, in monkey bar games, children acquire physical skills, direct their own learning, and coordinate with their peers. Risky play is promoted through spaces that stimulate challenge according to the age of the children, without underestimating them. We work to identify what children are capable of, so as not to simplify their play and thus not restrict their development. If we overprotect them, they have fewer opportunities to strengthen their character, socialize, and learn from the exchange with others.

In-contact-with-nature play refers to the type of play that offers greater stimulation and diversity of experiences (Louv, 2018). Children can play with all their senses, exploring and observing organic materials, which change according to the season. In this way, they learn about the rhythms of nature. For instance, they pay attention when the leaves fall from the trees in autumn or when leaves sprout again in spring. This helps them feel part of the world, developing environmental awareness, and a sense of belonging to their territory. Having nature elements in schoolyards also democratizes access to green areas.

AYELÉN SCHOOL CASE: LEARNING CIVIC SKILLS THROUGH PLAY

Opportunities for the development of civic skills through play require conducive and safe environments for learning to live in a community.

A case when we had the chance to see this is the Patio Vivo at Ayelén School.¹ This schoolyard was designed with the objective of promoting one of the central aspects of the educational project, which is to encourage students to dream of their futures without setting limits when projecting their educational, professional, and personal trajectory.

To help students develop confidence in themselves, we decided to create a very big and challenging steel structure, a 3-meter-high and 30-meter-long monkey bar game (see Image 35.2). Our goal was to allow students to test themselves, discover and develop their abilities, and gain self-confidence as they played on the monkey bar. Children may decide how and where to climb; learn how to balance; coordinate with their peers to play; and develop courage, self-regulation, and caution. The game has four different levels, so it allows everyone to participate at their level of choice.



Image 35.2 Steel structure for risky play in Ayelén School. (Credits: Patio Vivo Foundation)

¹Ayelén is a new school, developing an educational model of excellence, innovation, and inclusion. The school promotes values, knowledge, and skills that allow their students to design their future. For more information: <https://colegioayelen.cl>.

The most cautious ones can play on the first level and move up as they develop their confidence and physical skills.

Another important element for this schoolyard consists of a large topography, with a slope on one side and bleachers on the other side. The slope promotes movement and at the highest point, students can jump into a padded pit. The bleacher is also an open classroom, whose purpose is to hold classes and group activities, such as exchange opinions, debate, or a place where students can organize themselves. This structure ends in a field for sports games and various activities such as performances and others.

For this Learning Landscape, we also designed a large brick hill (see Image 35.3), 2 meters high and 8 meters in diameter. This is a place for meeting, socializing, and free play, where youth direct their movements and observe the whole playground from another perspective.



Image 35.3 Brick hill for free play in Aylén School. (Credits: Patio Vivo Foundation)

Finally, a plantation of almond trees was set up, as a way to mark the seasons of the year: trees shed their leaves in autumn, then bloom and renew their foliage in spring, and finally the students can harvest their fruit at the end of the summer. In this way, children discover the cycles of nature, understand the time and processes required for fruit ripening, and learn to care for the environment.

Learning Landscapes promote a democratic education because they offer opportunities to welcome all members of the school community, embracing their differences. All students can experience the space according to their interests and abilities. While some of them can be very quiet under almond trees, others can play intensely in the big steel structures. In addition, *fixed*, *flexible*, and *brief* structures promote the development of critical competencies we believe are essential to thrive in a rapidly changing world. Hopefully, this new approach to thinking, designing, and using schoolyards can inspire new pathways for creativity, empathy, and collaboration to be active components in our democracies.

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A Systemic Approach to Promoting Democratic Education in Schools

Siamack Zahedi

The National Education Policy of India made a powerful assertion that “[e]ducation is fundamental for achieving full human potential, developing an equitable and just society, and promoting national development ... and our ability to provide high-quality educational opportunities to them [students] will determine the future of our country” (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020, p. 3). However, curriculum and pedagogy experienced in Indian classrooms have not supported this vision adequately (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2014, 2018, 2020; Probe Team, 1999; Singh & Sarkar, 2012). Schooling systems have remained largely unchanged for a century, even today grooming students to be obedient and efficient assembly line workers of an industrial economy or clerks for our long-gone British colonists. Such schooling cannot prepare children for the complex social and economic reality of our world today—a concern shared internationally (Deming, 2017; Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2015; Winthrop et al., 2017; World Economic Forum, 2016). At the Acres Foundation (AF), we are

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attempting to address this problem by consciously designing key elements of our schooling model—at a *systems* level—to reflect the values of democratic education such as liberty, equity, the empowerment of individuals and community to participate in decision-making and problem-solving, and the promotion of collaboration across stakeholders.

AF SCHOOLS: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

AF operates two K–10 schools in Mumbai, India, as of 2022. The schools are *private-unaided* institutions that are managed and funded privately without help from the government. Almost 50% of school-going children in India study at private institutions and this number is steadily increasing because of favorable parent perception toward the quality of private schooling in comparison to public schooling (Centre for Civil Society, 2017; Ministry of Education, 2019). Several examples of private networks of schools exist in India, with some operating only two or more schools (like AF at present) and some even growing up to more than 50,000 students spread across 20 campuses like at the largest school in the world—City Montessori School (City Montessori School, n.d.). The first AF school was established in 2012. It is known as The Green Acres Academy (TGAA-C) and is located in Chembur, a neighborhood in central Mumbai. The school serves 2892 students from grades Nursery (or pre-kindergarten for three-year-old children) up to Grade 10, as of May 2022. The second school was established in 2015. It too is known as The Green Acres Academy (TGAA-M) and is located in Mulund, a northeastern suburb of Mumbai. The school serves 1022 students from grades Nursery up to Grade 6, as of May 2022. Both schools are affiliated with the Indian Certificate of Secondary Education Examination (ICSE)—a well-established and popular education board in India with more than 2300 school partners. The medium of instruction at both schools is English. Indian schools adhere to a three-language formula, where Hindi and English (the two official languages of India) are taught (Joshi et al., 2017; Saini, 2000) along with a third language that is usually the state language (Sharma & Ramachandran, 2009). It is quite common for private schools to use English as a medium for instruction (Meganathan, 2011), since it is perceived as a necessity for socio-economic success in India. The student fees are on average between Rs. 108,000 and Rs. 124,000 or US \$1400

and US \$1600, placing the student families predominantly in the *middle class*.¹

A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

Our mission at AF is to empower students to become *changemakers*—individuals that actively support social equity and environmental sustainability through the use of entrepreneurial strategies that leverage innovative solutions to bring about positive change.² This end cannot be achieved by addressing the curriculum alone, or teacher professional development alone, or any other element of the schooling process alone. Instead a systems approach to change is needed (Senge, 1990, 2006; Senge et al., 2000). Decades of research has shown that there are a few key elements that significantly influence student learning—the curriculum, teacher capacity, leadership, school climate, parent engagement, and structures for data-driven decision-making for continuous improvement (Bryk, 2010; Murphy, 2013; Preston et al., 2017; Sammons, 1995; Sebring et al., 2006). At AF, we have intentionally designed these six elements of our schooling system to reflect the findings of current research and the values of democratic education.

Curriculum

Democratic education must leverage a curriculum that promotes equitable opportunities for learning. Research shows that the most effective and equitable approach to learning is one that acknowledges the fact that learners progress through a phased mastery process that begins with developing foundational knowledge before being able to meaningfully turn it into skills and competencies with the help of authentic opportunities for application (Alexander, 2003; Ashman et al., 2020; Bransford et al., 2000; Ericsson & Pool, 2016; Hattie, 2008; Kirschner et al., 2006; Mayer, 2004;

¹ Estimating that the average Indian household will spend about 10% of its income toward schooling (Centre for Civil Society, 2017), we can hypothesize that our students' families earn an average of Rs. 12 lakh per year, which would position them somewhere in the *middle class* that constitutes around 13% of households in India (Jasuja & Khan, 2017).

² AF's student outcome statement is inspired by a body of literature related to democratic and transformative citizenship education, presented in publications like Alden Rivers et al. (2015), Bandinelli and Arvidsson (2013), Banks (2015), Drayton (2006), Nagaoka et al. (2015), and UNESCO (2015), among others.

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018; Ohlsson, 2011; Rosenshine, 2009; Sawyer, 2006; Stockard et al., 2018; Sweller et al., 1998; Willingham, 2021). We must first build fluency in reading, writing, and math, along with core knowledge in the humanities, arts, and science, *before* engaging students in higher-order application work through projects and such experiential learning engagements. This might not align with the ideology of some purist *constructivists* that insist student learning must begin and end with student-directed experiential activities. But it ensures that *all* students are given the opportunity to build the same core knowledge base in school—a prerequisite for being able to engage in higher-order thinking, instead of leaving it up to the influence of their personal circumstances like parental education, parental involvement and beliefs about schooling, household income level, family climate, and other such factors. Learners without foundational knowledge—often low-income or special education needs—will not have the same *opportunities to learn* as more privileged learners simply because they do not possess the requisite prior knowledge needed to connect with and build on new ideas being introduced (Gee, 2008). This will lead to learning gaps within the student population, which is a serious issue because all the higher-order competencies that we prize in the twenty-first century and earlier are built on the foundation of essential knowledge and skills (Nagaoka et al., 2015). Building foundational skills and knowledge requires deliberate practice with just-right challenges that are followed up with precise and immediate feedback through the learning process. In order to accommodate these expectations within the constraints of rather large classrooms typical in the Indian schooling context, AF has turned to digital adaptive technology for math and literacy that (a) engages students in personalized learning pathways and (b) provides teachers with real-time student data that supports differentiated instruction in ways that would otherwise be impossible. We have also introduced one-on-one devices in the classroom across all subjects to avail of these benefits.

In addition to promoting equity in learning opportunities, the curriculum in a democratic school must also explicitly engage students with content related to citizenship and personal leadership. AF has designed two in-house programs to address this need. Further, we extended the school day to create space in the student time table to accommodate these programs. Our Transformative Citizenship Program engages students in the study of key aspects of the Indian Constitution (Ministry of Law and Justice Legislative Department, 2020) and the UN Declaration of Human

Rights (United Nations, [n.d.-a](#)), before critically examining the current state of problems related to the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, [n.d.-b](#)) and mobilizing learners into social action projects that aim at addressing the studied issues. At the same time, students are also engaged in a *homeroom class* at the start of each day where AF's Socio-Emotional Learning and Personal Leadership program is implemented. This program is built on the theoretical foundation of CASEL—a research-based framework for supporting students to develop self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Payton et al., [2000](#)).

Teacher Capacity

Democratic education entails collaboration and the building of individual and community capacity to participate in decision-making and problem-solving processes. These characteristics are reflected in AF's job-embedded professional development (PD) model. Indian schools typically provide one-size-fits-all workshops conducted by external experts, where teacher voice is completely absent in the PD process and they are only expected to be passive recipients of knowledge (Das et al., [2013](#); Ministry of Human Resource Development, [2018](#); Sinha et al., [2016](#)). Such engagements have very little influence on classroom instruction (Darling-Hammond et al., [2017](#); Knight, [2002](#)). Instead, a large body of research shows that effective PD is characterized by active engagement in the learning process through reflection and collaboration (Darling-Hammond et al., [2017](#); Desimone, [2009](#); Hattie, [2008](#), [2015](#); Little, [2003](#); Rust, [1999](#); Smylie et al., [2001](#)). At AF, we have created a PD model that consists of multiple complementary lines of action that reflect these characteristics.

One such approach is establishing learning communities at the school and network level. Professional learning communities (PLCs) are focused on improving teacher practice and student learning by having teachers engage in repeating cycles of inquiry and reflection together (Dogan et al., [2016](#); Vescio et al., [2008](#)). Practitioners teaching the same grade, or same subject, meet together on a weekly basis with a structured agenda that is focused on using classroom data to collaboratively solve problems and design innovations related to teaching and learning. Similar spaces for collaborative learning are organized at the network level (NLCs) with department leaders across both TGAA-C and TGAA-M school campuses participating. PLCs are a powerful means of providing voice and agency to

teachers—two ideals that Indian policy has constantly been promoting but that have been persistently missing in schools (Sarangapani et al., 2018; Batra, 2005, 2009).

Another approach for PD is ongoing classroom observations and feedback by peers. Such engagements support and encourage collaboration among team members, create a culture of sharing and learning among peers, and promote the distribution of evidently good practice in the unique context of the school (Bruce & Ross, 2008; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Hamilton, 2014; Millis, 1992). Teachers are supported by leaders to make time in their monthly schedules to accommodate peer observations at AF. Also, protocols to ensure the expression of positive and constructive feedback post-observations have been set in place. Opening one's classrooms to peers is not at all typical in Indian schools, and hence this required tremendous culture building efforts on the part of the leadership in order to implement successfully.

Finally, yet another approach for PD implemented at AF is formal teacher evaluation termed as “RevDev” (review and development)—a 360-degree mid-year exercise that provides each teacher with a comprehensive report on their performance based on data collected from instructional leaders, peers, students, and self-evaluations. Classroom observation data, student learning data, teacher performance data on workshop assessments, and perception data related to their general professionalism and participation in the community, all come together in a report to provide a holistic view of the teacher's performance. They are then taken through a workshop to help them analyze the data in their own reports and conclude with SMART³ goals for self-improvement that they record in their Self Development Plan. Teacher agency, reflection, and collaboration are prominent in this capacity-building process. RevDev report scores are also used by the administration to determine annual performance-linked incentives in a fair and reliable data-backed manner, instead of the typical practice of having school leaders solely use their discretion and determine increments as they please. RevDev has been one of the more complex interventions applied in our schools—teachers reflexively rejected it at first, out of fear of being judged by stakeholders. But, over time, as a culture of trust and belonging was built in the school community, they came to see that the process actually created an incentive system that is much more fair and democratic.

³Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound.

School Climate

The foundation of a positive socio-emotional climate is set by AF's values that aim at promoting transparency and honesty, trust, and collaboration, among other ideals reflective of a democratic education. These ideals were not established as directives by the school management. They were determined through an extensive group thinking exercise, which included the entire teacher body and school leaders across both schools along with the AF management team, in order to promote stakeholder voice. Built on the foundation of these values is the ideal of *inclusion* that AF has wholeheartedly committed itself to, inspired by the principles of multicultural education (Banks, 2015). AF's admissions protocols and schools administrative policies are intentionally aimed at promoting solidarity and equity across race, gender, caste, and ability. Further, the schools have adopted a research-based (Burns et al., 2005; Poon-McBrayer, 2018; Vaughn et al., 2012; Vaughn et al., 2010) multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) approach to effectively serve students with special educational needs—whether these needs arise from disabilities or poor academic foundations. This is a proactive rather than reactive approach to supporting children identified as being academically at-risk, with a range of interventions being provided systematically to help *all* students succeed, through the use of evidence-based pedagogy beginning with general education and increasing in intensity depending on students' response to specific interventions (Brown-Chidsey & Bickford, 2015; Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Kauffman & Badar, 2020; Sugai & Horner, 2009). An important goal is to help students with exceptional needs to receive these services while allowing them to be placed in the *least restrictive environment* (the general classroom) as much as possible. This is in stark contrast to prevalent practice of diagnosing and labeling students, pulling them out of the classroom and away from their peers, and sending them to the school's "resource center" for academic remediation during the school day.

Parent Engagement

Democratic education entails the capacity-building and involvement of key stakeholders such as parents in decision-making processes. In addition to creating and conducting digital and live parent workshops and parent meetings throughout the year to update them on the why, what, and how of classroom instruction, we also collect parent feedback through

anonymous surveys on all the key aspects of the school's functioning. This feedback is collected throughout the year and more comprehensively as part of the school's mid-year 360-degree review. The feedback is then analyzed by the school leadership team and strategic improvement plans are developed based on the data. These plans are shared with all stakeholders. The idea is to give parents a voice and leverage their unique perspective for the purpose of improving the school's services. Such practices are in stark contrast to the tradition of maintaining an arm's distance between the school and parents.

Data-Driven Decision-Making for Continuous Improvement

Involving stakeholders in decision-making implies that first the institution must have the capacity to make relevant data available in a timely manner to facilitate such decision-making processes. Research has shown that data-driven decision-making systems in schools promote student learning and optimal use of resources, by engaging team members in continuous cycles of action, reflection on action and its outcomes, and strategic improvement planning in order to achieve the team's goals and vision (Fullan, 2005; Hawley & Sykes, 2007; Copeland, 2003; Flumerfelt & Green, 2013; Park et al., 2013; Wilka & Cohen, 2013). One of the most complex aspects of AF's school model is its system for collecting data, visualizing it in dynamic ways to promote meaning-making and reflection, analyzing it collaboratively, and developing strategic improvement plans at the network, school, and department level. Data collected includes (a) student learning data from universal screening tests, formative assessments, and summative tests; (b) teacher and leader performance data related to RevDev; and (c) perception data about school climate, parent engagement, and all the other key elements of the AF school system. This data is then processed and presented to stakeholders at different levels including grade level or subject level PLCs, NLCs, head of departments, apex-level school leaders, and AF's board of directors. Decision-making and strategic improvement planning that result from the analysis process are decentralized to include those most knowledgeable of ground realities. Using data to make decisions minimizes bias and empowers stakeholders across the organization to have more voice and choice in directing the future of their organization.

Leadership

Collaboration and participatory decision-making processes are the hallmark of democratic education. These ideals can only be realized if the school's leadership is structured in a supportive way. Culturally, Indian managerial practices tend to follow a rather *transactional* or *paternalistic* leader-follower relationship, where team members are willingly submissive to the directives of the leader (Mansur et al., 2017; Pauliené, 2012). Studies show that this kind of leadership may be unfavorably associated with task performance, citizenship behaviors, and team creativity (Aycan, 2006; Hiller et al., 2019). Traditionally, the principal is the apex leader of the school and is in charge of all academic and administrative oversight. Decision-making on all aspects is centralized and focused at this one singular point. However, this does not reflect the ideals of democratic education, and hence decision-making and power is decentralized at AF schools.

We follow a *distributed leadership* approach (Diamond & Spillane, 2016; Harris, 2004; Harris & Spillane, 2008; Spillane, 2005; June; Spillane et al., 2001), where decision-making is shared across the organization in a way that ensures the person or team of people who have the most expertise and ground-level perspective related to a specific function are the ones who make decisions related to it. For example, teaching and curriculum decisions are made by the relevant grade-level or subject-level PLCs and supported by subject-level head of departments. Similarly administrative issues and operational or management issues are dealt with by teams and individuals who are experts in those fields. There is complementarity and collaboration, but no overlap of functions. Even at the apex level of leadership, separate individuals are appointed to drive distinct but complementary functions of teaching and curriculum, schools operations and management, and administration. The "Principal" in one school might be a teaching and curriculum expert, while in another school might be an operations and management expert. But the Principal is never the apex leader for *all* functions as typically experienced in traditional schools. Further, AF schools are directed at the apex level by Governing Councils that constitute representatives from all the different departments of the schools—teaching and curriculum, IT, HR, administration, and others. This ensures that power is not held by any single individual, but rather a multidisciplinary and collaborative body.

SUMMARY

AF has taken a systems-level approach to establishing democratic education in its schools. Addressing one key input or process in isolation from others will not allow for effective and enduring change. For example, addressing the curriculum alone will not suffice—we need to simultaneously build teacher capacity to implement it effectively, parent support to reinforce what is studied at school, a trusting and positive school climate that encourages open dialogue in the classroom, student data that allows teachers to adjust the course of the curriculum as it unfolds, and leadership support to ensure that all the required resources of time, instructional materials, data, and teacher autonomy are available. Similarly, addressing teacher capacity alone or leadership alone would not suffice without the simultaneous alignment of all other key inputs and processes. As one might imagine, this is no easy task. Challenges have been faced by AF from all sides. We experienced resistance from parents and teachers for almost every positive change initiative we attempted. We had to make very difficult decisions related to resource prioritization—whether it was related to time allocation for different subjects in the student time table, or staffing structures, or curricular investments, among many other matters. Trade-offs must be made—one cannot have it all. Involving stakeholders in decision-making processes does improve buy-in; however, it also makes the process more complex and time-consuming to facilitate. There is risk attached as well, especially when an organization’s culture is still developing and not everyone imbibes its values and espouses its vision wholeheartedly. However, time, patience, a very high benchmark for quality, and great resilience under pressure continue to see AF through its ambitious mission.

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Raising Glocal Citizens for the Future

Maw Maw Khaing

Growing up in Yangon, Myanmar, at a time when the country's education sector was facing numerous challenges, I understood what good education could mean for the future of a community. In time, I further understood the importance of quality education, which I carried with me especially when pursuing higher education abroad, eventually materializing into my life-long goal. To this day, I spend my time as a proud educator. I believe that real positive change begins with a quality school environment to achieve a quality education—a right that every child deserves.

However, delivering education that meaningfully nurtures children to become productive and happy people cannot be undertaken by a single person.

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RAISING A SCHOOL

In 2020, the entire world was beginning to feel the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially the education sector. Myanmar, like any other country but even more so as an emerging country, felt those impacts when the education ministry could not make education accessible to all of its students and public schools were not allowed to open. Then in 2021, as the second semester of the 2020–2021 academic year was about to start, the February 2021 political unrest in Myanmar shook the country and its citizens. Given the unsettling environment within the country, it was unsafe for schools to stay open; no one dared to go to school until the following academic year.

I had already started a preschool and primary school since 2018, and at the start of Fall 2021 I started to notice that the children around me—sons and daughters of close relatives and family friends who were not enrolled in school—did not have access to quality (or formal) education because either they were not from the main cities or international school tuition was very high. As an educator, I found this unacceptable. While learning never stops (even if schools no longer exist), we have a grade-level system where children must enroll in an institution-like school to progress in grade level each year, and eventually finish high school. Given the shut-down of schools, I decided to initiate an online middle and high school for those students who were bound to lose their second year of schooling and grade levels. Thus, American International Studies (AIS) was born—under the time of the recent military coup. It was important for me to instill a sense of global and local values, civic education, and social justice education in the curriculum. We named it “American International Studies” because we were using a US curriculum, and the school would grant each student a US high school diploma at the end of the program. We partnered with a US-based dual High School Diploma program, which allows our students to take courses both from our school and from the partner program. Students would get the best of both worlds: learning from our well-trained and impassioned teachers from Myanmar, as well as from teachers at the partner program—where students would receive a firsthand American education.

The school started after the Myanmar coup in February 2021¹ when teachers stopped going to school, and parents stopped sending their children to public schools. At the same time there was a group of people who demanded that all children stop going to school altogether. Since AIS was created during a time of turmoil with so much dissent about the governing authority at the time, we did not want to call it a “school” (we felt that this term would represent another negative authority figure for children). Instead, we chose to use the term “studies.” We wanted AIS to simply be a place where children could come to study and earn a quality international education. After developing the school’s vision and mission, we spent time embedding global and local values and civic education into both the curriculum and the school culture. While children took core courses like English, Math, Science, and Social Studies, we also added courses like Global Citizenship which was inspired from Professor Fernando Reimers’ Global Citizenship curriculum in his book *Empowering Global Citizen*. His book informs students about global civic engagement and the importance of being a responsible citizen, promoting sustainable development goals espoused by the United Nations (Reimers et al., 2016). It goes along with the idea of the “common good”—which I will mention later in the chapter. We wanted to define a collective common good through the seventeen sustainable goals that the United Nations set out.² We integrated our subjects to teach across multiple disciplines, and had children apply to UN-SDG goals with one overarching theme that drove us throughout the whole year via project-based learning.

Last year, we led a project centered around the topic “Equal Education for All,” and we imagined how we wanted to build a dream school that all children could enjoy. Since students had not been attending school physically for two years at this point, we thought we would share how students around the world go to school. For example, some students take the bus, hop on boats, and some students even go to school using makeshift bridges as they walk to school. We asked children to design their own school schedule, school location, and holidays. This project really helped children attain a sense of what schools *should* look like and define what schools could mean for them.

¹During the Civil Disobedience Movement people stopped conceding to the occupying powers through non-violent practices such as strikes, peaceful protests, and boycotting.

²<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

This year we tried tackling the issue of world hunger: where our food comes from, how our food is made, and what the global crisis means and its implications for the community around us? Through our lessons about world hunger we learned how much effort and energy goes into the food we eat every day. As the children realized how much resources are required and how much work is put into producing food, they became more conscious about sharing, wasting less, and more knowledgeable about our consumption. From a simple lesson, children learned that they are agents of change, problem-solvers, and have a responsibility to the world. At our school, we try to bring students to the real world with project-based learning methods. Students, since they are young, can explore the problems of the world.

DEVELOPING A DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL IN PRECARIOUS TIMES

When we started our program, the founding team (inspired by Apple and Beane's writing about Democratic Schools³) mapped out key goals:

Goal 1: Democratic Goals

To uphold a set of values that guide us to ensure we follow shared values, we developed the student's profile which serves to meet our goal of building a shared value for students as a guide.

- Problem Solvers: develop problem solvers and critical-thinkers
- Cooperation: raise collaborators for a constructive society
- Achievement: nurture self-motivated and self-directed individuals

³Apple and Bean's Democratic Schools:

- Concern for the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities.
- Concern for the welfare of others and "the common good."
- Faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems.
- The open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity, enables people to be as fully informed as possible.
- The use of critical reflection and analysis to evaluate ideas, problems, and policies.
- An understanding that democracy is not so much an "ideal" to be pursued as an "idealized" set of values that we must live and that must guide our life as a people.
- The organization of social institutions to promote and extend the democratic way of life. (Apple & Beane, 2007, p. 7)

- Respect and Empathy: treat and respect each other, and our environment with love and kindness.

We also asked teachers what kind of common values they wanted to idealize for the image of a teacher:

The image of an AIS teacher: we want to be teachers who role-model a happy, peaceful loving community with our peers and with our students. We want to gain satisfaction in our work by working together to build a peaceful community, respecting each other to build a happy environment, being flexible, and being role models for our children and peers to build a loving community.

Goal 2: Push for a “Common Good”

The push for a “Common Good” is our second goal, where we created student houses similar to those in *Harry Potter and The Philosopher’s Stone*.⁴ They were a combination of the student council as well as student teams. There were four houses which senior students led. Since AIS was still a small school, almost all senior students had a chance to be in leadership roles. Moreover, students from various grades joined student houses. As a cohort of students, they came together to create their own house logo, values, and chants. Together as a team and as the student body, they planned the school’s Annual Olympics (Sports Day), Fun Fair, Myanmar New Year Donation Drives, and Special Interest Clubs.

The houses were very inclusive and promoted the welfare of the student body as a whole and also within students in the houses—creating a sense of community, family, belonging, and friendship. Houses participated in fundraising and volunteer activities in addition to checking-in with each other on the academic and social wellbeing of team members. Other ways these houses portrayed global and local values, embracing children’s rights was through sharing ideas and holding weekly meetings that kept students well-informed and updated about their house and

⁴ Best of WeAreTeachers HELPLINE: Using a House System in the Classroom. https://1.facebook.com/1.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.weareteachers.com%2Fhouse-system-in-schools%2F%3Ffbclid%3DIwAR0DW_Dpksq-wvIpBo7Eb_1Bp071Bef-Qw_XSNs4Ep-JbQXra65hd4CdRrc&h=AT1kFpjb-KtQJLTng7SgoKr-mIuirRjs-4-gKNgTxqfi-XQfy47u6yk-Tw8gTxu0p9Y8BswOhdTWqo0SeGxv_ovSH1wAT1_8a2G6ER_SrzDz_2cCoEWSiCtMOSjFX9LCKiVWQ5yPQ

school. Furthermore, decision-making usually required a consensus of the general student body.

With respect for our values of peace and glocal citizenship, even the simple task of naming student houses had to be more conscious. Teachers were in charge of naming the houses, which took quite some time. And with respect to Myanmar's cultural heritage, we first decided to use the names of historical kings and queens. It was a topic that raised debate among us because there was only one queen in Myanmar's history,⁵ and that meant there wouldn't really be equality in the house names—as one queen among kings would continue some gender bias. And Myanmar's kings did not really represent peaceful values because, as monarchs, they placed an importance on war and forceful subjugation to expand their territories; an autocratic king would have exercised many violent values. So, we decided to base it on the four different eras in Myanmar, where its culture and economy flourished the most: the Bagan Empire, Hanthawaddy Dynasty, Ava Dynasty, and Konbaung Dynasty.⁶

Goal 3: Respect the Dignity and Rights of All

Our very first goal to respect the dignity and rights of minorities as well as the majority of the students is something that was embedded in the curriculum, the house system, and our school's, students', and teachers' profiles. While they are by design embedded in the school structure, whether it actually happens or not can be a whole other story. There were a few moments from the academic year when we were confronted with a few difficult times but it did show that our students and the school community were embracing and upholding our values.

LISTENING TO OUR STUDENTS (2022 AND ONWARD)

Student Voices

Last year, our school's seniors raised an issue about a teacher with whom they had some conflicts. Since they had experiences from the houses about how to raise issues with the due process, they brought a consensus of the

⁵Queen Shin Saw Pu was reigning monarch from 1454 to 1471.

⁶Bagan Empire (1044–1297), Hanthawaddy Pegu Dynasty (1287–1539, 1550–52), Ava Dynasty (1364–1555), and Konbaung Dynasty (1752–1885).

senior student body with petition signatures and a letter highlighting the issues they were facing with several points to the principal. They also requested an answer from the principal about how their petition will be addressed. Eventually, the school had to talk to the teacher in question, and then have a three-sided conversation with the teacher, students, and the school to resolve this issue. We believe that school is always a partnership between teachers, students, and parents; and all of us should hold each other responsible, accountable, and motivated as we all contribute to the future of our children and the community and society around us. I firmly commend the students for raising their voices while keeping the schools' values intact.

Creating an Online and In-Person Learning Community

As mentioned earlier, AIS was created to defy the usual rules of the school. At first, we really only delivered quality academic programs which meant quality textbooks with highly student-centered teaching methods. However, we did not have any extra school activities or co-curricular subjects—since many students were taking courses digitally, they could not develop socially. Students, after seeing other activities from our other schools, started to demand activities and a curriculum that went beyond academics in the classroom.

Even though a full-blown school was not the vision of AIS, we realized that students depended on our school as a community to create a peer-learning environment where they can grow, share, and develop into young adolescents. And despite AIS not having a lot of funding, and running a small program with fifty students where the schools' fees just covered teachers, admin, and textbook costs, we decided to create programs beyond the academics in the classroom. The school never asked for extra fees from parents for those activities either, and we did not want to start asking parents as it would have increased tuition fees; we wanted to keep the program accessible. As a team, we decided to let children come up with what kinds of activities they wanted to add, and asked if students were able to teach each other. Most of the activities involved physical meet-ups, so we used our existing physical school space and shared it with the students from AIS. We now have student-led clubs: badminton, crocheting, debate, reading, and writing. The debate, reading, and writing clubs were added because students wanted to improve their English writing, reading, and speaking skills.

RAISING GLOCAL CITIZENS FOR THE FUTURE

Think Globally, Act Locally, a world-famous phrase that is very popular among environmentalists which was first introduced in 1915 by Scottish planner and conservationist Patrick Geddes in and has been used extensively in business, environmental research, education, multinational corporations, and even in churches. The word “Glocal,” coined by Sony Corporation’s founder Akio Morita, is something that represents what we are trying to achieve at our school. I think that we have to be both global citizens of the world and local citizens of our country and community.

We started out as a school of fifty children who all spoke Burmese fluently⁷ and their English was conversational. As our school grew and started to receive students whose first languages were neither Burmese⁸ nor English, then we started to wonder if we were democratic enough in terms of our language policies. Were we missing some points as we tried to promote fair bilingualism at our school? If so, how do we stay democratic in all aspects of our schooling?

Going back to the question of how our school started to expand and we started to receive students who did not readily speak neither Burmese nor English, we wanted to focus on respect and individual dignity. We realized that we had to be respectful about how we treated a person’s dignity, and their right to speak their strongest language. School is supposed to be a safe place for children, and despite our ambitions as school leaders, we have to remember we are working with children for whom school and home are the most important places for them—places where they spend most of their time. So we mapped our schedule and curriculum so that children will receive English and Burmese languages by the end of primary school. We did not always expect students to become fluent in both languages immediately; instead, we pushed for respecting children while they are learning and absorbing, so that those languages become familiar enough for them to use.

Another way we embraced glocalization at our school is when we gave the name of Myanmar eras for the aforementioned student houses, donation drives during the Myanmar new year, and allowing students to express

⁷ Burmese (as a language) is Myanmar’s official language, yet used by the majority ruling ethnicity.

⁸ There are over 100 ethnicities in Myanmar with several languages spoken, and Burmese is not their dominant language. Burmese is the official language spoken by the majority ethnic group (Bamar), which makes up 68% of the country’s population.

themselves in Burmese as they become bilingual were practices we implemented to raise awareness of our cultures and traditions as children grow up in a globalized world. Democratic values have different connotations in different contexts, and it is important that we recognize the cultures, traditions, and languages of all cultures without favoring the more favored language, tradition, or culture.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

As our school grows, we hope to continue embracing, instilling, and upholding our glocal values. We think these values are different from one school to another because they have to be reflective of the school's immediate community, the school's founding story, and the school environment's lived experience. Through our academic curriculum and beyond our academic curriculum we hope that we can create a student community that demonstrates glocal values, civic engagement, and social justice.

Even as I write this chapter, it has been the two-year anniversary of the country's political upheaval as well as our school's. Running a school is always full of challenges and turmoil, but I push forward with this endeavor with the hopes of nurturing the future foundation of this country. Schools are a second home for students where we create a safe and conducive environment for them to grow, share, and develop with the same-aged peers and adults who guide them. At AIS, we hope to be the guides for students to become good citizens who promote glocal values, ethics, and good citizenship.

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Ukrainian Refugees in Poland: Two Schools Under One Roof—One Is Offline, the Other One Online

Przemek Stolarski

CONTEXT: HOMOGENOUS? NOT ANYMORE

At the end of January 2021, I was writing about the Polish education system for one of my assignments at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. Attempting to capture the main characteristics of schools in Poland, I did not hesitate twice to write that our schools are relatively homogenous, with little diversity in terms of students' national, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Simply put: this claim did not age well because just a few months later schools in Poland had to cater to an entirely new, diverse population. **As a result of the war in Ukraine, Poland became the second-largest host nation of refugees in the entire world.** With the estimated 3 million Ukrainian refugees making up roughly 8 percent of Poland's population—the vast majority of whom are children—the list of challenges faced by Polish schools is long. Fast forward just a few months later, every day approximately 10,000 kids from Ukraine were

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enrolling in Polish schools (Głos, 2022). Special schools with instruction in Ukrainian and Russian were being created. Classrooms with students speaking three or four different languages were slowly becoming the new normal. Within the timespan of barely a few months, the landscape of Polish schools has changed dramatically and many of the long-held assumptions no longer hold true. While in many countries the debate around equity and inclusion has been going on for decades, Polish schools with their lack of diversity never picked up this theme. **But as of now, there is nothing homogenous about students' demographics in Poland.**

For Ukrainian students, finding their way around the system is not easy. Take, for example, Olya, a high school senior from a city in Ukraine, Drohobych. She comes across as very confident and outspoken. Maybe even a little bit hyperactive, with her hands gesturing almost non-stop. Serving as an interpreter for her mom, she translates from Polish to Russian with the speed of light. Sometimes, I do not even finish my question and she is already turned to her mom, ready with the Russian version of my question. It just happens that I understand enough Russian to know that she also adds quite a bit to her mom's responses. Nothing that would change the substance of the answer, just a few words here and there making the replies sound more definitive or, rather, articulate. In all honesty, one could barely believe she is just 17. Olya came to Poland with her family in May. Like many Ukrainians, she has lots of relatives scattered all around Poland. The country is not entirely new to her. She would come and visit them every summer so her Polish is quite good. But it might not be good enough for a place at the University of Warsaw. Just a few weeks ago, Olya applied for a spot in the coveted MISH program—an interdisciplinary college program in humanities and social sciences. It is one of the few programs with an interview requirement. All applicants need to present on a humanities-focused issue of their choice but also answer questions related to Polish history or literature. With no background in Polish schools, Olya spent the last few weeks preparing for the interview. She feels confident. What worries her is how the oral presentation is evaluated. One of the criteria? "An excellent command of academic language." Even being relatively fluent in Polish, she lacks the exposure to the type of language that one encounters only in academic work. On top of that, Ukrainians graduate from high schools two years earlier than their Polish counterparts so Olya is also younger than other applicants. "There is still

some time until October when the academic year starts,” she says with a tiny smile of hope.

While it is not the most extreme example, Olya’s story is illustrative of the very real consequences of undemocratic education. No public education system can be seen as democratic if it is not designed with **inclusiveness and access**—one of the crucial elements of this book’s framework. The specific lesson from the situation in Poland is that these aspects of inclusiveness and access need to be deeply entrenched in our daily work of designing educational experiences. It cannot be an afterthought. If it is, we are doomed to fail and replicate the undemocratic character of education.

It is in this context that I was invited to join a team of experts from Transatlantic Future Leaders Forum to write a comprehensive report on how to efficiently integrate refugee-kids from Ukraine into the Polish education system (Di Maggio et al., 2022). In this work, I experienced how tackling the refugee crisis through educational technology provides an opportunity to rethink the system, making it more inclusive and democratic. The following paragraphs are my, although limited, account of how this opportunity was (not) used and why.

INTRODUCTION: DESIGN, NOT ACCOMMODATIONS

The report was commissioned by the Polish Ministry of Education and we all wanted to use the chance to work with the major decision-makers in the field of education to create actionable advice on democratizing Polish schools. Currently, by most metrics, they are not. Students, teachers, and local communities alike do not have a say in how our schools operate. The symptoms are visible: a record-high number of teachers are leaving the profession, there were multiple failures to provide quality remote education during the pandemic, and there is a growing frustration with public education resulting in the rise of private, alternative schools, as well as homeschooling. With this context in mind, our entire team was committed to argue that the influx of Ukrainian refugees must be a catalyst for systemic changes in Polish schools.

Yet, it is frequently in these kinds of circumstances—where schools need to manage and evolve to meet the moment—that the real democratic deficit appears. With educational challenges of this scale, the natural tendency of policymakers and government stakeholders is to come up with ad hoc accommodations rather than engage in crafting structural, long-term

solutions. And when it comes to accommodations, it becomes almost obvious to seek answers in quick technological solutions such as language learning apps or e-learning materials. Sadly, so many of them turn out to be disappointing or even entirely misplaced. “*Although there is an overwhelming consensus of how EdTech can contribute to learning and the facilitation of the learning process, many EdTech initiatives are designed without taking existing evidence into consideration*”—reports a comprehensive synthesis of studies on EdTech in refugee contexts published by Save the Children (Tauson and Stannard, 2018).

Witnessing the shortcomings of these newly introduced solutions, it seems entirely fair to ask: **can EdTech even help in building democratic schools?** And when the entire country’s public education system suffers from a democratic deficit, how can we answer new challenges not only with new tools but also with a renewed understanding of democratic education? Feeling the sense of disappointment about our limited coverage of this aspect in the report, I pondered on these questions for months. In the following paragraphs, I present three challenges of using EdTech in building democratic schools and potential recommendations to tackle them.

CAN EDTECH EVEN HELP IN BUILDING DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLS?

Challenge 1. Generic EdTech Tool: Ukraine Edition

Contrary to conventional wisdom, it might be beneficial to start with the question: **who should take initiative in developing EdTech solutions for the ongoing refugee crisis?** As we have seen in the first months since the 2022 Ukraine invasion, there are multiple bottom-up initiatives of informal groups and NGOs (e.g., a mentoring program launched by Polish teenagers or a training program for Ukrainian teachers organized by Teach for Poland). Insofar as these initiatives might bring a lot of value, organizations behind them are often “*innovating outside their core competencies*” (Dahya, 2016). Few organizations can count refugee education as their core competency. In Poland, the history of refugee education is almost non-existent. **To illustrate this, in 2020 there were only 19 multicultural educators hired by Polish schools. In March 2022, there were 150 of them—a massive increase but still too few to meet the needs** (Mikulska, 2022). Taking into account this lack of expertise,

the fears of new technology programs being unsustainable are not unfounded. Negin Dahya, a world-renowned expert in refugee education, argues that EdTech interventions targeting refugees must be sustainable, otherwise “*unfulfilled hopes and promises related to technology-based or technology-enabled programs that fail could break trust and demoralize communities*” (Dahya, 2016). The interventions developed in the private sector are even more likely to be problematic in that regard. Even a quick look into the database of Ukraine-focused EdTech solutions created by European EdTech Alliance shows that the vast majority of these initiatives are hasty adaptations of ongoing services to the new context, translations of resources and tools into Ukrainian, or existing services that are simply offered for free to Ukrainians. With profit as the main incentive of private entrepreneurs, their interests and the interests of refugees are more than likely to be misaligned. It is important to emphasize that while these initiatives can be in their own ways helpful, they cannot fulfill the promise of sustainability.

On top of that, the lack of Ukrainian refugees’ input into the design process of these interventions is also a problem. The complexity of their stories is likely to be absent or misrepresented as it is frequently controversial from a political standpoint. For example, while there are some resources for educators focusing on the controversies around racist treatment of non-white refugees from Ukraine (Re-Imagining Migration, 2022), this theme is almost entirely absent in any larger-scale education interventions that are currently developed in Poland. As these issues create the threat of uncovering the negligence and discrimination of Polish authorities, there is no incentive to talk about them. Without the involvement of refugees themselves, there are only few people left who can advocate for the inclusion of such issues in education.

Recommendation: Ensuring that interventions are appropriately contextualized, organizations behind them have expertise and their incentives aligned with the needs of the served community is critically important. In Poland, this means:

- All EdTech tools should be co-designed with a variety of community members: refugees, local school authorities, and different demographics of students and teachers.
- Given the diversity of refugees’ experiences, the consultations should include a broad range of constituents and also happen locally to account for a range of needs represented by different communities;

- More cooperation is necessary between private entities and NGOs (e.g., a consortium or alliance) to ensure that the funding is allocated to evidence-based solutions most likely to yield desirable educational and social outcomes as opposed to overlapping solutions.

The sense of agency—crucial for democratic education—needs to be embedded in all interventions, while their sustainability should be an important consideration from the very beginning.

*Challenge 2. Two Schools Under One Roof: One—Offline,
the Other One—Online*

One of the major recommendations in our report for the Ministry was to task the ministry’s technology group with creating a nation-wide educational platform that would be based on three pillars: information and effort coordination; training and capacity building; and educational resources.

With the benefit of hindsight, **I regret that our team has not explored the possibility of suggesting the creation of a platform that would be a joint effort of the Polish and Ukrainian ministries of education.** This could have prevented the beginnings of a parallel education system that seems to be emerging right now. Recently, the Ukrainian Ministry of Education created the National Online School—an e-learning platform focused on maintaining the continuity of education for refugees with online asynchronous and synchronous learning. But this well-intentioned effort of the Ukrainian Ministry has had unintended consequences. **As of today, many students that escaped to Poland are not integrated into Polish educational institutions but receiving education primarily through the National Online School.** In some cases, Ukrainian students—unable to fully follow lessons in Polish as a language of instruction—use the platform to study on their own. A huge part of them does not even enroll in Polish schools (Igielska, 2022).

In another part of the report, we wrote about the so-called two schools under one roof model present in Bosnia and Herzegovina, whereby students share the same school building but operate under two entirely separate systems with different teachers, curricula, and resources. Based on ethnic segregation, this practice is discriminatory and teaches children there are inherent differences between them (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2018). Little did we know that “two schools

under one roof” will manifest itself in Poland with the grave help of technology. Insofar as the popularity of the National Online School might be only temporary, it carries a great risk of depriving children of formal schooling experiences and contributing to the permanent exclusion of Ukrainian kids from Polish schools. **It appears that two schools under one roof is quickly becoming a viable and concerning prospect, but this time the two schools differ in modality: one is offline, the other one—online.**

Recommendation: EdTech interventions need to be cognizant of the risks of segregation and exclusion of refugee populations and, especially, of the potential technology has to cause segregation as an unintended consequence.

- The efforts between Polish and Ukrainian stakeholders must be more coordinated, e.g., through the creation of a joint group between the countries’ respective ministries of education that would discuss policies likely to impact the refugee population.
- Recognizing the hardly replaceable experience of traditional school, all legislative and technological solutions need to prioritize formal schooling and permanent integration.
- The educational outcomes of the refugee population need to be accurately measured and tracked over time to provide stakeholders with data necessary to take informed decisions.

Challenge 3. Language Gatekeeping

The unprecedented scale of refugee migration to Poland is likely to be seen as nothing but a source of multiple problems. This risk is likely to be particularly visible in the field of education, where the sudden influx of hundreds of thousands of new students is, by all means, going to stretch under-resourced schools. Language difference is among the most feared aspects. In light of this, it is even more important to remember about the deep need of substituting a deficit-based approach with an asset-based approach. This is important in regard to children. In the report, we wrote:

when creating solutions to integrate Ukrainian children and youth into Polish educational institutions, the characteristics potentially ascribed to them, such as their lack of Polish language skills or their intense experience of the ongoing war, should not define them. Young people joining Polish

schools will, like any other students, have their passions, interests, strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, the new students of Polish schools have no control over the narrative through which they may be perceived. For example, the lack of knowledge of the Polish language—foreign to the vast majority of refugees—is not an objective deficit but only a potential difficulty created by the new context in which the refugees found themselves.

Importantly, this approach needs to be extended to adults. One of the most obvious assets that should be a part of creating solutions are Ukrainian teachers. According to the latest estimates of the Ukrainian Ministry of Education, about 22,000 teachers fled Ukraine, most of them to Poland. While the newly introduced legislation makes it easier to hire them in Polish schools, there are still massive training needs. To date, there are no EdTech solutions that would make it easier for Ukrainians to enter Polish schools as teachers. In our report, we suggested utilizing microlearning-based forms of professional development for both Polish and Ukrainian teachers alike. For the former, it would potentially allow them to react on the spot to the dynamically changing situations of their classrooms, making their learning relevant. For the latter, it would decrease the training time, allowing them to enter classrooms faster and gain employment. While, to my knowledge, there is a lack of a directly applicable blueprint project of professional development in similar circumstances, there is no shortage of inspiration. For example, Cell-Ed has successfully utilized low-tech microlearning to provide skills such as increasing employability to different demographics.

Fortunately, some initiatives very visibly embraced an asset-based approach. For example, Nana, a project run by The Village Network—an early childhood EdTech startup, connects Ukrainian nannies with Polish families, providing training inspired by the Reggio-Emilia pedagogy. In the first few months of the refugee crisis, it was evident that refugees would experience language gatekeeping, and their lack of proficiency in Polish would be frequently seen as a consequential deficit. Nana's approach challenges that by emphasizing academic evidence for the benefits of growing up with foreign language caregivers.

Recommendation: EdTech solutions must go beyond supporting language acquisition. In the spirit of asset-based approach, they should find ways in which existing assets of Ukrainian refugees can be best leveraged.

- Bilingualism must be embraced as the new reality of the Polish education system, e.g., all important information related to school activities need to be presented also in Russian/Ukrainian; formal school communication with parents should take place in both languages; school should display information on their website/social media in both languages.
- To fulfill the promise of democratizing education, all of the constituencies, including the most marginalized and vulnerable, need to be recognized for their potential to contribute and the sole lack of Polish proficiency should not be the reason for excluding people.
- Ukrainian teachers, educators, and caretakers need to be hired for a variety of different roles at Polish schools in recognition of their unique knowledge of refugees' lived experiences and as a means to create ground for permanent integration.

CONCLUSION: EDTECH NOT FOR DIGITAL TRACKING

Perhaps it might not be very intuitive to evaluate the state of democracy in schools through the lens of educational technology. This is also apparent in the themes covered by other chapters in this book—technology is not central to any of them. After all, the questions of agency, power, and authority in schools—all intimately related to democracy—are largely about interpersonal relationships between teachers and students. But it is exactly in how technology is utilized, especially in times of change, that we can see some of the greatest democratic deficits.

Too rarely, technology is used to increase participation and give voice. Instead of including students in co-designing learning experiences, the same power structures are being replicated and only mediated through technology. What might be a helpful tool to avoid this pitfall in using technology is the SAMR Model (Fig. 38.1) developed by Dr. Ruben R. Puentedura. The model is meant to serve as a taxonomy for using educational technology (Puentedura, 2013). While it refers mostly to classroom usage, its general structure can also be informative for wider implementations of EdTech solutions. According to the model, educators can use technology to redefine, modify, augment, or substitute different elements of teaching and learning.

Most often, the use of technology is limited to substitution with no functional change to the character of learning experiences. In some cases, however, substitutes can be harmful. This is, no doubt, the case when

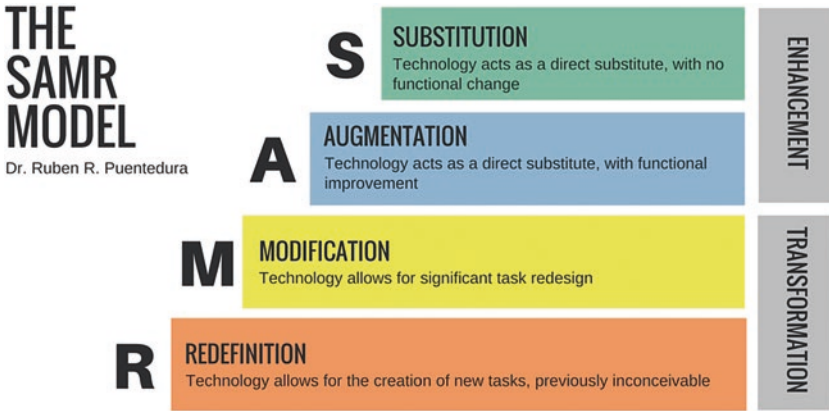


Fig. 38.1 The SAMR model

formal school experiences, full of peer interactions and opportunities for building meaningful relationships with adults, are substituted with a poor online alternative. It is even worse when technology is used as a tool for creating tiered educational systems with separate tracks of subpar quality. In fact, this digital “tracking” has been happening for many years now. Top universities offering much cheaper online degrees or certificate program of questionable quality are a prime example. **In that case, one’s socioeconomic background determines the “track.” If tiered systems continue to be created in Poland, the factor determining one’s track might become nationality.**

This nationally segregated education can come about in a very inconspicuous manner. We know it from other contexts: lots of technologies that become means of segregation are adopted precisely because of their promise of personalization and their ability to accommodate “special needs.” And it is exactly this type of thinking that we need to get rid of. Truly democratic schools are capable of recognizing their various and changing constituents as equals: giving them space to use their funds of knowledge and work together to design solutions. There is no doubt that EdTech can be, and already is, an important part of that. In the context of Poland, the massive help provided by language learning apps, tools supporting bilingual instruction, or, simply, digital educational resources should obviously not be underestimated. But none of it will matter if we lose vigilance and allow digital segregation to set in.

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Good Trouble Report

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MISSION

Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and help redeem the soul of America.
—John Lewis

Since its founding in the summer of 2020, Good Trouble, a student-run collective, has aimed to amplify the voices of Cambridge students to improve the experiences of students who come after us. In 2022, when Good Trouble hit a roadblock, we turned to our peers, asking them what issues they saw in school that never seemed to be addressed.

One person mentioned “*those* teachers,” referring to educators who are the subject of constant student complaints, but never change their style.

School year, 2021–2022 (November 20–June 17).

With support from our teachers, Benji Cohen and Kanku Kabongo.

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Conversation erupted immediately, as every student had at least one teacher in mind. Our discussion led to some consistent themes: these educators all assigned work from their desks without engaging with their students.

Inspired by the words of Civil Rights leader and US Congressman, John Lewis, to “get in good trouble,” we started in spaces we knew well: classrooms.

From January to June 2022, Good Trouble designed and launched a new project geared toward student feedback and examining how teachers incorporate it into their teaching. At the end of each semester, teachers usually ask for student feedback on the class. These surveys are a way to improve teaching and learning for the next cohort; however, they raise important questions:

- To what extent do teachers truly accept the feedback that they receive?
- How can teachers be sure that they are understanding and applying the feedback appropriately?
- Are students aware of how teachers attempt to make changes to their teaching style in order to accommodate feedback?
- How can feedback surveys be reimaged to benefit students while they are actively in a teacher’s classroom?

It is important that students’ voices are heard; yet the current method of obtaining feedback through end-of-semester surveys is ineffective. First, there is no way to monitor whether teachers incorporate or even view the feedback. Second, the timing of these surveys means that the students who gave feedback do not benefit from the potential changes. Third, students might fear that the survey is not anonymous, and so they may resort to false compliments to preserve a positive relationship with the teacher. Fourth, while teachers may read the students’ responses, they may forget to implement the feedback, especially in the bustle of the new semester. Finally, the new group of students will not be able to judge the teacher’s improvement.

To combat this, Good Trouble sought to amplify student voices and give students power within their classes and over their learning, while avoiding the potential pitfalls of providing critiques directly to their teachers. Open, authentic, and honest dialogue with teachers is the most effective way of giving teachers feedback, as it is interactive and demonstrates that student voices are valued. Surveys, on the other hand, can seem like

something teachers check off at the end of the year. For this reason, we decided to work face-to-face with students and their teachers.

In effect, Good Trouble served as an intermediary between students and their teacher. By facilitating live conversations, we ensured that students' perspectives were heard. In Good Trouble-run circles, the students spoke openly without the worry that they may hurt their teacher's feelings. As opposed to blunt criticism, we packaged student feedback in a constructive way for the educator. When meeting with teachers, rather than lambasting classroom practice, we reflected student opinions and feelings, and discussed how the educator could update, tweak, or adapt their practice based on the feedback. We completed multiple sessions with the students and teachers, including a class observation, to assess whether the teacher took the feedback into account, and offered advice accordingly. Through this process, we prioritized student feedback and perspective without compromising teachers' honor or student anonymity. Our system was completely student-run, from design to implementation to facilitation. It was a first-of-its-kind initiative at Cambridge Rindge and Latin School (CRLS).

POINT PEOPLE

We split into three groups based on the three teacher volunteers. Since we needed time to facilitate conversations with their students, it was critical that we remained flexible. We had to be ready to “go” at the teacher's convenience. A crucial part of this system was having a point person for each group who reached out to teachers to schedule meetings and communicated with the rest of their group to ensure they remained on track.

SCHEDULE

In January 2022, we drafted our methodology and developed a schedule. We followed a rigid timeline because we were working with teacher volunteers and needed to ensure that they could trust that we would follow through on our commitment to them and their students.

We set a date in June to complete our final report. Then we planned backward. Our schedule consisted of milestones we would meet to finish on time. These milestones included the following:

Step 1: First Conferences with the Teacher Volunteers

To be as transparent as possible, the facilitators of Good Trouble met one on one with each of the teacher volunteers to explain the mission and purpose of the project. We outlined the potential risks and allowed the teachers to decide whether to participate. These conferences were also used to understand the teachers' schedules and choose which of their classes would work logistically for Good Trouble members.

Step 2: Observations

To be successful, we needed to understand what the class felt like for the students. Observations helped inform our next steps and planning. We sent in one student from each of the three groups to observe a full eighty-minute class prior to collecting student feedback. During observations, we sat quietly, avoiding disruptions by not introducing ourselves. We sat near the corner of the room. We looked for engagement levels from the students, the style of teaching, methods the teacher used to reach students, and wrote questions. We took notes about what we observed in paragraph and bullet-point form.

Step 3: Student Feedback, Session 1

Approximately one week after observations, we returned for feedback sessions. The structure of the discussion varied from class to class. In most sessions, the class was split into two or three groups and Good Trouble members facilitated feedback conversations. These sessions were anonymous and the teacher was excluded from the class as they occurred.

We wrote a list of common questions to ask the students to better understand the teaching that was happening in their classroom. These questions were designed to encourage the students to provide as much information as possible about aspects of the class that they found helpful, as well as changes that could be made to better their experience. It was important that every group was asked the same set of questions to maintain consistency across the different classes. Some of the questions that we asked were as follows:

- I. What does a typical class day look like? Walk us through the day in your class starting with the minute you enter the door.

- II. What are your immediate thoughts, reactions, and/or feelings when you step into this classroom?
- III. What's something that you could change about this class? Why?
- IV. Do you feel respected as a person and as a student?
- V. Do you feel like you can reach out to your teacher whenever you need?
- VI. Do you feel that your grade in this class reflects your work? Is it a "fair grade"? Why or why not?
- VII. If there was one piece of feedback you could tell your teacher without fear of punishment, bias, or "hurting" their feelings, what would it be?

After developing the questions, we coordinated with the teacher volunteers to determine how and when we would gather this feedback. We debated about the ideal size of the groups because if they were too small, students might feel uncomfortable sharing, and if they were too large, students might feel as if they were still in class and default to staying silent. Taking this and our own experience as high schoolers into consideration, we decided on small groups of around ten students. Rather than random groupings, we asked the teachers to split the class based on friend groups to increase student comfort and encourage them to speak.

The students gave us both positive and negative feedback for each teacher, including: information about the parts of the class that they found helpful, complaints about the class, and ideas of possible ways to improve their classroom experience. While some students wanted more hands-on projects, other students enjoyed the workload and were comfortable with the assignments they were given.

Step 4: Distilling Feedback and Teacher Conversations

After the student feedback sessions, we condensed the information we received into constructive bullet points, and presented them to teachers in twenty-minute in-person chats. We excluded specific quotes and student names for anonymity purposes, but made sure to include all aspects of the students' feedback, including both positive and negative comments, to ensure that their perspectives were heard. In addition to a student response summary, we also provided Good Trouble-generated suggestions about how teachers might use this information to improve their class. We gave the teachers three weeks to implement the feedback.

*Step 5: Second Student Feedback Session, Reflection on Changes,
and Additional Feedback*

The goals of the second feedback session were to evaluate whether significant changes had been made in accordance with the initial feedback, report additional feedback to the teacher, and allow students to give Good Trouble feedback on our process. Based on round one, we broadened some of our questions for the second feedback session to elicit richer responses. Then, we scheduled our second student feedback conversation with the designated teachers.

After three weeks, we returned to the classrooms to speak with students again. To maintain consistency, we mimicked the first feedback session in format, size, and location. We kept the same groups to reduce bias or complications. The second student feedback began with the same opening questions as we had in the first round. We did this for two reasons: (1) we wanted to analyze how students' responses compared between sessions and (2) we wanted to give the students space to take the session in a direction that felt valuable to them. Then we asked new questions specifically for the second feedback session. Some of the questions were as follows:

- I. How do you feel when you walk into this class?
- II. Do you feel like your teacher has made an effort to improve student learning?
 - A. If so, how has your teacher made this improvement?
- III. What was one thing that you noticed that has changed from three weeks ago?
- IV. Do you feel like your feedback was heard? Do you feel like your feedback has been incorporated?
- V. Do you feel this process helped to improve your classroom experience?
 - A. Do you feel it helped your teacher understand who you are and what your needs are?

Step 6: Second Teacher Meeting

Before we met with the teacher the second time, we analyzed and looked through the feedback we received; then reframed it to deliver it in a constructive and helpful manner to the educator. Then, we met with the teacher to discuss the feedback and answered any questions they had.

EVIDENCE

We worked closely with our three teacher volunteers to collect, share, and discuss student feedback. For Teacher One and Teacher Three we had three Good Trouble Members who collected the feedback, and for Teacher Two we had one Good Trouble Member who collected feedback.

Teacher One

When we first observed Teacher One's class, we noticed that the students stayed silent for most of the period. The teacher encouraged their students to talk about the classwork at the beginning, and they eventually started to do so. When the class transitioned into new material, the teacher lectured the students and they fell silent again. After multiple attempts to engage the students in different ways, Teacher One finally managed to get the students to participate. This struggle for student engagement may have been due to it being period one of the school day, which meant students were tired.

The following week, we had feedback session one. One of the student groups was very hesitant to speak and initially didn't give us much information. We tried warming them up by giving examples of our own experiences in high school, and they eventually came up with feedback. The other group, however, gave us a great deal of feedback immediately. We believe this contrast between the two groups reflected the students' own classroom behaviors and it was not something that could easily be changed. Below is a summary of the feedback:

- I. If students don't respond to questions, move on instead of waiting for students' responses, as a way to keep them engaged.
- II. Students would benefit from optional challenges that can be attached either to the group work or to the optional homework.
- III. The students would prefer two shorter breaks throughout the class to break up the period and make it feel shorter.
- IV. Students would enjoy more hands-on project-based assignments to maintain interest in the class.
- V. Students would prefer if the teacher stays consistent with the idea of homework being optional (i.e. don't punish students for not finishing the homework if it is said to be optional).

For the second feedback session, we wanted to see if the students noticed any changes that the teacher had implemented. The most obvious change that the students noticed was that there were two breaks evenly spaced out, instead of one in the middle. Students also told us that the teacher had explained some of the changes they attempted to implement, but students had not noticed the changes the teacher described. When we told this to the teacher, they expressed surprise, and thought the students all knew exactly what had changed. This emphasized a major disconnect between what the teacher thought they were doing, and what the students wanted the teacher to do. While the teacher had good intentions to help the students and respond to their feedback, a gap remained between both parties.

Teacher Two

In Teacher Two's class, our main takeaway during the initial observation was that the class seemed unengaging. Students completed an assignment on their computers, and when the teacher did speak, many students were on their phones or distracted.

During the first feedback session, the class was split into two groups and separated by friend groups and table groups. The groups also happened to be divided by gender.

Group one was more difficult to engage. The students seemed hesitant to offer feedback about their teacher and made it clear that they all appreciated the educator. They noted that the teacher was beginning their career, as well. Most students in this group did not enjoy the class and stated that they often found it "boring." That said, they emphasized that it was largely an issue with the subject and the curriculum, which they stated "was unengaging to begin with." Students also expressed concerns around the workload, which they described as mostly "easy." Students also disliked delays in grading. When asked what they would change about the class, students in Group one struggled to find answers, and reiterated that their teacher was "good" and "trying," but that the issue, again, was the subject and the curriculum. In many ways, the feedback from Group one felt like whiplash. One subset of students would argue that there was too much structure in assignments, a lack of options and creative outlets, and too many graphic organizers. A different subset then immediately argued the exact opposite. One thing that students agreed on, however, was that the class needed more student choice. The other major point of consensus

was that there should be less independent work on the computer and more class interactions such as discussions and group work.

The debate and discussion that occurred within Group one illustrated the difficulty of being a teacher and the impossibility of accommodating all students. Yet, it also illustrated the beauty and importance of asking students for feedback. Students were able to consider and point out the nuance.

Group two was more talkative and more critical than Group one. They expressed discontent with the grading practices, class structure, and assignments. Many also said that they found the class too “easy” and felt like it was full of “busy work.” Some students, of course, disagreed, illustrating the difficulty of ninth-grade classes, in which students from all different backgrounds and educational experiences come together. Similar to Group one, the consensus was that there needed to be more options, considering the vast needs of all students. Both groups craved more class interaction, group projects, and debates. The independent nature of the class was what made it unengaging.

When we returned for the second feedback session, we had a whole class discussion. When we asked how students felt when they walked into this class, the responses were largely negative, whereas many were more neutral initially. When asked if they saw any changes to the class since the feedback session, the majority of students said that they had not. Upon being prompted to rank pedagogical changes on a one to ten scale (one being absolutely nothing has changed and ten being big, significant changes) every student had an answer under four. In fact, many students expressed greater discontent with the class. Many attributed the lack of change to how late in the year it was. One student said that they felt like their teacher was “stalling until the year was over,” a statement that resonated with others. The students also expressed that the fact that their teacher was willing to participate in this project showed their willingness to listen to student voices, which they appreciated. Despite the overall discontent, the students validated Good Trouble’s project. Many even asked if we could go to their other classes and do the same thing.

Teacher Three

In Teacher Three’s class, for our first feedback session, we split the class in half, allowing the students to decide their groups. By allowing them to choose, we hoped to increase student comfort to guarantee more

conversation. While we had a curated list of questions, we allowed students to direct the conversation. The first group was very outgoing, and throughout the session, they built off of one another. It was clear these students really related to their peers' experiences. Their biggest concerns were the grading system, their teacher's style of teaching, and confusion about their assignments. The second group was less receptive. They voiced similar concerns; however, there was much less conversation.

During our conversations, the grading system was consistently mentioned. The students' biggest frustration with the system was that it differed from the standard grading system in their other classes. Throughout their educational careers, these students were used to a certain structure: exceeding expectations translating to an A, meeting expectations being a B, and needs improvement was a C or lower. In this class, however, a "meeting expectations" translated to a lower mark in the gradebook. Many students made similar comments and some explained that they didn't attempt assignments as they'd receive the same grade regardless. The grading system seemed to be a deterrent for students.

Students also discussed the style of their lessons. Many were displeased with the lecture model this class often utilized and they expressed the difficulty of retaining information during lectures. Having to take notes was a source of anxiety for students. As facilitators, we knew this model is common in students' high school careers and beyond.

In regards to assignments, many students mentioned they didn't understand the prompts or what was expected of them. Their confusion stuck out to Good Trouble facilitators because it was likely the leading factor for various other issues the students mentioned. Particularly with grading, if students don't understand what is expected, they can't "meet expectations." Understanding assignments is the foundation for students' academic success.

When we briefed the teacher, we broke down our notes based on significance and the frequency they were mentioned in the discussions. The three main topics were as follows: (1) grading system, (2) lesson styles, and (3) student confusion regarding assignments.

We began with positive feedback to prevent overwhelming the educator with critiques. Our intention was to improve pedagogy, not attack it. One of the biggest challenges we faced was converting students' grievances, which were often negative, into constructive criticism. Having three different categories helped as it allowed us to highlight major areas of improvement without repeating all the information we heard.

During this meeting, there was a real effort on the teacher's end to hear our perspective on solutions since we could relate to their students. Once we'd given the feedback, it was time for the implementation. Due to availability, the implementation time period for this class ended up being seven weeks.

When we returned to the classroom, we split up into the same groups to maintain consistency. We began with the same initial questions. Student answers barely differed. Frustration was evident. The students acknowledged that while there had not been significant differences, they'd seen the teacher make efforts to change. They appreciated that they switched from essays to more creative projects. Overall, however, there were no major modifications. This showed a discrepancy between how the students viewed the results of the process versus the teacher. Even though students hadn't seen much progress, they enjoyed having a safe place to air their grievances. Many of the students agreed that having these conversations helped them realize they weren't alone in their struggles. By the end, the students expressed that they wanted to duplicate the process in their other classes.

OBSTACLES

Two unexpected obstacles challenged Good Trouble. The first obstacle was the lack of constructive criticism from students. We heard many more complaints about teachers and far fewer suggestions. Though the purpose of our project was to give teachers honest feedback, many students did not present concrete solutions to issues that they voiced. Packaging the feedback constructively was a challenge. Over time, we realized that we needed better follow-up questions in feedback sessions. If a student mentioned an issue, we asked them to brainstorm possible solutions. This strategy elicited much more high-quality feedback.

The second issue concerning feedback was the lack of participation from some students in group discussions. Though many students contributed, several members in each group consistently stayed quiet. One reason for this could have been that some students felt uncomfortable putting their opinions out in the open. We debated how to engage these individuals, as our mission is to lift up the voices that teachers might not hear. We need to continue to develop solutions for this challenge.

We learned that the most effective way to increase student engagement is to provide a complete overview of our mission before every discussion,

emphasizing confidentiality and lack of judgment. After this introduction, more students readily answered our questions. This adjustment taught us that increasing our transparency made us more relatable as fellow students. Being seen as equals is a key part of the project, as teachers, by nature, are in a position of power, which makes it difficult for students to offer them honest feedback when prompted.

CONCLUSION

Getting feedback from students is a fairly simple process; the students must be asked for feedback, the teacher must thoroughly read the feedback, and then the feedback must be implemented. In our feedback sessions, almost all students had something to say, and most of the feedback was concise and comprehensible. Often, the thoughts and voices of students are overlooked in relation to teacher feedback because people assume they don't know what makes a good learning environment. However, students are best able to determine whether or not a learning environment is effective. Additionally, students were happy to debrief their in-class experiences. It built a sense of community, knowing that their thoughts were shared by their peers. Although the students felt that not much changed during the process, they liked having the opportunity to talk to each other and discuss the class. Most asked us to provide this space for other classes, along with teachers asking us to do the same. Furthermore, our teacher volunteers were happy because they didn't have to create and read survey results. It was a lot less labor-intensive for them.

This process revealed changes we want to make and long-term goals we have. The most necessary changes were as follows:

- I. Beginning this process earlier in the school year:
 - A. Adding more turns of the cycle so that the students are more comfortable with the facilitators and the teachers have more time to implement feedback.
- II. Adding more student facilitators:
 - A. Increasing the diversity of the facilitators in terms of academic experiences and perspectives, grade level, gender identity, religious beliefs, etc.
 - B. More facilitators would mean working with more teachers and classes, allowing for more student participation.

- III. Bringing teacher participants together so that they can advise one another and talk about the changes they are making in their classes.
- IV. Adding a transparency and accountability step for teachers where they notify students of the changes they are trying to implement and what policies they do not have the power to change.

Good Trouble’s biggest takeaway is that it is critical to create spaces for students to express their feelings about their classes—whether it is productive feedback or simply venting grievances. Conversation-based feedback makes students feel better about class whether or not the feedback is implemented. Forms and written feedback don’t accomplish the same goal. Therefore, we would advocate for one lesson every quarter where students can discuss with their peers (and a student facilitator to then give the feedback to the teacher) based on their experience in the classroom.

Acknowledgments Good Trouble was facilitated by two students, Carlie Duverglas and Shirine Daghmouri, during the 2021–2022 school year. They are both currently high school seniors.

In addition, thank you to our three teacher volunteers. We appreciate and admire your willingness to participate in this project and your desire and dedication to student voice and revolutionizing classrooms.

Thank you to the students who participated. Every piece of feedback was instrumental. Thank you for your brilliance, honesty, and your trust in us and in this project.

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CONCLUSION

When we began this project nearly two years ago, we couldn't have imagined the positive response that would come from our co-authors. There was an outpouring of desire to share stories and experiences. We received responses from both existing schools and what we've called concept schools—those ideas that have yet to become realized.

All of these chapters share a common theme: designing, imagining, building, and leading democratic schools and learning environments is complex, difficult, and messy work. It can even be dangerous. Education goes beyond the school—it affects, and is affected by, everything swirling outside the schoolhouse doors. It is also enormously invigorating and rewarding.

The principle of equality for all people is the foundation for Democracy, Big “D.” A society is only as strong as its most vulnerable citizens. Although this isn't a book about Democracy, we know that schools respond to and reflect the larger pressures of societies. Politics and policy debates impact how schools attend to the needs of their students, especially those from non-majority groups in their countries. We see similarities in this volume about the experiences of the global minority¹ in

¹We refer to the global minority as a group of people in the world who do not consider themselves or are not considered to be white. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/global-majority>.

the United States, the rural poor in Mexico, the indigenous youth in Peru, and the youth in South Africa and in India. Throughout the Global South and the Global North there is a clash between the willingness to commit to democracy—slow and frustrating as it is—and the desire for a strongman (or woman) to impose a rigid order. Schools are not immune from this polarization.

As our authors were drafting, writing, and polishing their chapters, many of their countries witnessed extreme political upheaval. Governments were toppled, leaders were jailed, elections were celebrated, and democracy was threatened. Some authors could not complete their chapters due to the political turbulence—the act of *writing about* education took a backseat to the actual need *to educate* amid a political crisis. One author couldn't make an original deadline because as he wrote: "Last week has been terrible for Perú. We had a failed coup, the ex-president is in prison, a new president has taken the seat and many people are protesting nationwide. The new president declared a state of emergency and some of our rights are limited and the army is on the streets. So far twenty people have died in confrontations between protesters and army/police." Even as chaos engulfed Peru, school went on. In Myanmar, in the midst of a coup, a new learning environment was founded where young people could experience a sense of agency and control for their own education. Poland was thrust into the world stage when the war broke out in Ukraine, causing educators to consider a new set of ideas and practices.

We experienced, in real time, how schools are not necessarily a preparation for life, they are life. (When a young person leaves school in the twelfth grade, schooling has been over seventy percent of their life!) We had to continue to adapt our expectations and deadlines. We wanted this book to be as inclusive as possible. We hope we have successfully connected the experiential (what people actually lived) with the inspirational (what they have seen themselves or others do) to the aspirational (what we hope others begin to do).

We are pleased that we have included such a wide range of experiences and perspectives in this book. Some may argue that religious schools cannot be democratic or that military service is antithetical to the practice of voice and choice which is included in one of our pillars. However, we wanted to include examples that challenge western liberal democratic thought. Perhaps this volume will expand our own thinking. We have not advocated for authoritarian schools, but we have been open to models and ideas that do not always find their way into books about democratic

schools. We also wanted to emphasize the universality of schooling: all places in all situations have schools and need better ones. The type of schools and the meaning of democratic schools do not necessarily look the same in every context. It is necessary to broaden our vision to see the whole picture.

We need to recognize that bringing ideas into practice is always filled with compromise. We didn't have room in these chapters to delve into all the ways in which our author-leaders have had to adapt and change their ideas, but we hope you find ways to engage with them and their schools. Similarly, we hope that our concept schools—those invented but not built—will create a groundswell of support for further development so that we read about those schools in our next volume!

Most importantly, we hope our intention of providing a platform to discuss our democratic schools framework has been realized. In working on this volume we wondered if our original pillars would fit with the lived realities of our authors. Would their experiences resonate with ours? We think that they have. We have also been pleased that authors wanted to keep learning from one another. And, as Linda has taught the framework in her classes, we have been inspired to see future generations of educators use and shape these for themselves. Again, that was a dream of ours: could this framework take on a life of its own that would keep inspiring new ideas and new schools.

Here, again, is the framework that our authors considered as they told their stories and shared their ideas.

- (1) **Democratic education emphasizes the open flow of ideas and choices, regardless of their popularity.** Students and teachers have the space to express themselves without limiting the rights of others. Democratic learning environments create safe and empowering spaces to enable all voices and perspectives to be heard.
- (2) **Democratic education is a high-quality equitable education and is accessible to and inclusive of all people.** Democratic learning environments are rigorous, identity affirming, and culturally inclusive. These environments have an intentional focus on issues of equity and hold students to high expectations while respecting students' intersectional identities and varied cultural values and beliefs.
- (3) **Democratic education contributes to the “common good” through active engagement, consensus, and compromise.**

Democratic learning environments enable critical and compassionate dialogue, active listening, and reflection toward the advancement of society. Students and teachers develop the ability to communicate, debate, and synthesize multiple points of view to make decisions. The respect and protection of each other's humanity and dignity is ever present in support of a more just society.

- (4) **Democratic schools organize students, parents, social institutions, and the larger community collaboratively to achieve its goals and to solve theirs and society's most urgent challenges.** Democracies are collective projects. Collective decision-making structures, practices, and policies must be maintained over time and updated when needed. Democratic learning environments continually welcome and value all voices and reflect on process and outcomes, considering the challenges of our times and our unpredictable future.

We have seen in so many of these chapters how school leaders consciously teach the meaning(s) of democratic participation. Many chapters emphasized that social justice can be attained through better education. The term "social justice" has become synonymous with democratic schools. Social justice speaks to how you treat others, especially the most marginalized of society. For a society to be just its citizens need to be treated respectfully. Everyone must feel included in the common good and recognize that participating as a member of the community, as a citizen, is actually a skill that needs to be taught and repeatedly practiced.

Schools are where young people (and adults) can learn to be members of society. Teachers and other caring adults must believe that students are, indeed, capable of learning and exhibiting their knowledge at very high levels of mastery, if given the appropriate conditions and support. Most chapters share the belief that social justice can be attained through a better education.

However, not all chapters take place in schools. Some chapters reflect that traditional school has not worked for some (or for many), and therefore these designers have opted out from traditional schooling. We include those stories since disengagement from school is a global problem. We hope the examples here will find their way into more countries and communities.

It is clear from reading these chapters that it is definitely possible to have students leading the processes to create powerful conditions for

learning, including hiring and providing feedback to teachers. In fact, treating students as co-conspirators in this journey called school is perhaps the best way to ensure deep engagement. Schools, both concept and realized, that put the arts in the center of learning have a unique ability to encourage students to take control of their own learning and participate in their larger community. Isn't that a worthy ideal of education? Similarly, it is tragic that so many schools, especially those that serve the global majority or are located in the Global South, find that accountability pressures in math, reading, and sciences have completely eliminated opportunities for young people to express themselves critically and creatively. We firmly believe that the rights of all children demand an education in which academic excellence is not trapped inside the parameters and limits of standardized assessments. Solutions to our world's problems require well-trained scientists and engineers, but they also require poets, singers, painters, and actresses.

We return to the 2021 UNESCO report, which focused on principles of non-discrimination, social justice, respect for life, human dignity, and cultural diversity. Our enduring questions grew from our discussions about the report. We asked the following:

1. How do schools actualize liberty, equity, community, and collaboration in their local contexts?
2. How do schools manage and evolve to meet the moment, reflect the voice, values, and goals of their communities, and draw on community resources and funds of knowledge?
3. How does democratic schooling prepare students for an unpredictable future?

Our authors wrote about their experiences with these aforementioned questions. Now, as we examine the chapters holistically we find that there may not be straightforward answers, but rather a series of tensions that we have highlighted as key takeaways and questions. We offer them here for your consideration.

- Freedom Versus control

Who has freedom? Who is in control? When and why? Is the school able to create conditions where young people and teachers feel that they are making important decisions about their learning and their participation in

the life of the school? If teachers do not feel that they have control about questions of teaching and learning, will students feel compelled to learn? We believe that students can exercise a freedom that is positive for their overall development while accepting some limits and responsibilities. When do teachers know that their students are ready for freedom and autonomy? Freedom and control need not be viewed as opposing forces separated by infinite distance, but rather two ever-present possibilities always shaping important decisions.

- Standardization Versus choice

What has been the role of standardization in curriculum and assessment and why? What might happen if more choices are introduced? Could students opt for options created by themselves and not for those typically made available by others? Perhaps it's a lack of experience, fear of the unknown, or minimal trust in the players that inhibits more experimentation. In some countries and communities a national curriculum and the results of scores on a high stakes test are the only measures of success. What would happen if this weren't so? Would countries collapse? Or would more ways of expressing how one knows or has mastered material come to the surface? Some of the chapters have explored how indigenous ways of knowing can offer alternatives to current practices that are causing hard to young people.

- Autonomy Versus Top Down Decision-Making

In the name of social mobility and social efficiency, we see policymakers arguing for more autocratic decision-making and many societies embracing such a rigid discourse. In the name of equality, all classrooms must do the same, be on the same page of the curriculum, and take the same test. But is that what people really need? Is there a role for autonomy? For choice? Many examples here posit that those closest to the classroom should make most of the decisions that impact and shape the lives of students and families. If social improvement and transformation is truly the goal for all schools, how can that happen if everyone is doing the same thing, everywhere? Equity is not the same as equality: all young people do not need the same thing.

- Collective Versus Individual Decision-Making

What happens when the idea of “us” as a collective is embodied in classrooms and school? Many suggest that being part of something larger than ourselves has the power to positively shape and transform lives. Others have focused more singularly on individual acts: we can only count, commit, and depend on our own actions and behavior. We have just begun to uncover some of the tensions between individualism and collectivism. We think so much about individual liberty when we assess the virtues of a democratic society, but do we fully consider the necessity of limits to that individual liberty so that others can be free as well? In discussing democratic learning environments, some authors have skewed toward collective decision-making. Is this always what schools and communities need? We feel that we need to continue to respond and learn about this tension.

FINAL THOUGHTS

In *Democracy and Education*, a book written more than a century ago, John Dewey (1916) posited that successful democratic practices can reveal how much people have in common and how they can learn from listening to one another. Furthermore, democratic practices can help us honor our differences as we interact with one another and strive to find agreements.

That may be our most enduring takeaway. How have the schools and concepts profiled here reflected Dewey’s seminal ideas? Our strength is always about how we honor differences and learn from one another. There is little evidence throughout history that autocracy breeds inclusivity. If there is no inclusivity can we ever say that we have a democratic learning environment?

Debates about the purpose of schooling will surely continue to swirl, as they have for centuries. Democratic schools cannot eradicate poverty, racism or casteism, or systemic oppression (Labaree, 2008). However, how we structure our schools; develop and engage with pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment; and the ways in which we actively listen and involve our students to be active participants in their own learning can create different conditions with better results for young people. That is the hope of democratic schools. That is what our framework for democratic education underscores.

Whether in India or Chile, South Africa or the United States, young people and their teachers want to live a *good life*. Across the globe, this means that some people strive for economic and housing security, the ability to have and provide for a family and a sense of well-being. That is the

promise and power of schools: we can reach young people and give them a pathway toward prosperity.

Recently, one of Linda's former students, Joanna, reached out to her. She is now a successful local media producer. "BAA [name of school] gave me a sense of possibilities. You showed me that I could go into this field, even though most people don't look like me in it [a black woman]. And you gave me unconditional support." Each of our authors has stories like this from their communities. It is why we collectively commit ourselves to fight systemic oppression, whatever that might look like in your context: one child at a time, one classroom at a time, one school at a time. That is the most powerful takeaway: commit and sustain. Keep on doing the work. Never see the glass as half empty.

We realize that a book such as this is not exhaustive. We have not included much on cutting-edge technology-based initiatives. We also have not considered how current developments such as new artificial intelligence services like Chat GPT, or Bing AI, are influencing learning and schools. We also would be remiss if we didn't invoke the climate crisis. Some of our authors have alluded to the ways in which climate plays a fundamental role in the education of children in their communities. We look forward to more discussion about the ways schools can be places for young people to discover short- and long-term solutions for the healing and survival of this planet.

We also hope that a future edition to this book might include more discussion of hub schools where families can get *all* their needs met in one place. We had a chapter that discussed community schools in the United States and also a chapter about how a mother reacted to dramatic changes in her daughter's schooling experience. We hope these perspectives provoke some new radical thinking about what schooling needs to represent for people in our current times. Certainly, schools as we currently know them cannot be the norm for the next century.

We hope that our authors' experiences have contributed to the growing field of democratic education, both in theory and as practice. We have hoped that these wide-ranging examples have helped the reader define the characteristics of democratic education in your community. We want others to build on our emerging framework, through an ongoing conversation, and even disagreement. We invite new and divergent responses to the ideas that our authors have put forward. We are interested in creating a multidirectional response to these stories. We want to hear about your

hopes and concerns regarding democratic education, about your successes and challenges.

What would your answer be to this question:

In my context, democratic education is _____.

How do you fill in the blank?

Our enduring vision is to spark an ongoing movement of educators and citizens determined to imagine, create, and build democratic learning environments all over the world. Our children demand nothing less.

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