

A Nationwide Study of how Democracy is Implemented in Schools

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Abstract

Traditional schools are bureaucratic institutions. Democratic school, however, encourage more egalitarian relationships between teachers and students. This was a descriptive study of the democratic practices that schools implement despite the bureaucratic nature of traditional schools. Self-identified democratic schools were e-mailed a survey. An overarching theme in all schools was a respect for equal decision-making among students and staff. Differences were found between “alternative” and “free” schools. Alternative schools were public institutions, larger, implemented more practices to establish democracy, and had much more bureaucracy. Free schools were all private institutions, smaller, used more community service to establish citizenship, and less bureaucratic.

Literature Review

Children and adolescents spend most of their time in school and on school-related activities (Carlo, Fabes, Laible, & Kupanoff, 1999) and therefore the school is an important socialization agent (Markman, 2002). But students typically do not feel involved in their school even though they spend a large amount of time there (Markman, 2002). Students often feel that schools are controlled by adults and that students are not given opportunities to create their own environment (Boyer, 1990). Traditional schools maintain hierarchical relationships between students and teachers and among teachers themselves. They are large formal bureaucratic institutions in which problems are settled by the administration and teachers (Kohlberg & Higgins, 1987). In contrast, democratic school programs encourage more egalitarian relationships between teachers and students and among students themselves. At the core of this practice is the idea of participatory government – one person, one vote – whether student or teacher in dealing with issues of fairness and community issues (Kohlberg & Higgins, 1987). Some educators have argued that when students are treated as active participants of change rather than as passive objects in the school’s bureaucracy, students will develop a sense of social usefulness to be carried on in their life after school (Mosher, Kenny, & Garrod, 1994). Schools have a central role in cultivating character by including self-discipline and empathy, which in turn enable true commitment to civic and moral values (Goleman, 1997). In so doing, it is not enough to lecture students about values; they need to practice them.

To date there is little scholarly work on the effects of democratic school programs and no research has been conducted on the implementation consistency of such programs. There has been little discussion as to the potential limitations facing democratic school programs and how such limitations affect the implementation of these programs (Scharf, 1977). Many schools are simply too large to permit effective student participation. The separation of the school day into periods and subjects prevents a sense of community from developing among the student body. Also, the bureaucratic nature of schools can hinder student involvement as the principals might see such participation as a threat to his or her control of the school (Scharf, 1977). Therefore, the question of how democratic school programs are implemented is paramount. This research investigated the practices that democratic schools implement and how such schools were able to prevail over the bureaucratic nature of schools.

Democratic Education

During the past few decades, educators have criticized the traditional citizenship education in high schools, which usually consists of courses in civics or government. Such courses are limited in their ability to produce responsible citizens (Kohlberg, 1985). While students are taught about democracy, they are not allowed to practice democracy (Mosher et al., 1994). Learning about democracy may be one

of the least experiential aspects of the K-12 curricula (Furman & Starratt, 2002). Instead, some have advocated for participatory forms of schooling and many schools have succeeded in establishing the fundamental components of democratic schools. Schools need to create roles of responsible participation that allows students to control the school themselves and to help graduating students become persons who can make society a just community (Kohlberg, 1980). However, school administrators are at best nervous about and at worst totally opposed to granting students a greater role in the schools (Levin, 1998). The use of democracy is minimal because the risks of democracy are chaos and loss of control (Furman & Starratt, 2002).

A culture of individualism has dominated conventional education in the United States for the past century (Goodman, 1992). This individualism supports a competitive, isolated learning environment where the concept of working to help others is not one that is commonly encouraged although it is often spoken of as a virtue within our society (Goodman & Kuzmic, 1997). Dewey (1966) stressed that schools should mediate students' learning and membership in the larger democratic community. Durkheim (1973), like Dewey, believed that to encourage interest and caring for the collective good the school should instill a feeling of affection for the collectivity in a child when he/she leaves the family. The simplest manner that schools can encourage civic participation and interest in the collective good is to govern itself through a practice of participatory democracy. In this manner, the school is a bureaucratic, rule-governed organization that provides students with direct power and responsibility for governance in an environment that is small and personal, like the family, but is complex, rule-governed, and democratic like the society in which the students will be citizens (Kohlberg, 1980).

Although there is no exact definition or requirement for a democratic school most have democratic forms of classroom management, school governance, and relations among students and school personnel (Mosher et al., 1994). Classroom management is democratic in that every student is equally important and their views are equally respected. The democratic school governance consists of all school members (administrator, teachers, staff, and students) having an equal right to participate in the school community whereby rules and concerns of the school become personally felt and community-shared rather than pragmatic school routines that have to be managed. Finally, the relationships among students and school personnel is democratic in that all students are treated equally by the teachers and the teachers exercise authority by virtue of their wisdom and expertise and by means of consent rather than by virtue of their position of authority and by means of coercion (Kohlberg & Higgins, 1987).

Positive Student Outcomes of Democratic Education

Research has found that, in general, increased involvement in the school environment can stimulate more positive attitudes toward school and decrease negative behaviors. Students who share the responsibility for the rules and practices by which their school operates take on roles that require unfamiliar social perspectives and must make more complex moral judgments (Graham, 1975). Both active power and decision making responsibility and more passive belongingness in secondary groups stimulate social and moral development (Kohlberg, 1969).

Lewin (1938) showed that students in a democratic classroom were more effective in social and work goals, and demonstrated greater cohesiveness, fairness, and group participation. Bosel (1978) found that violence was higher in schools where students perceived that they could not influence what would happen to them. Alternately, violence and robberies were less likely in schools where students expressed relatively high feelings of control. Democratic schools were not necessarily associated with lower school crime but it was the schools where students felt that they had no control over their circumstance that had more crime.

For students in a democratic school, Power, Higgins, and Kohlberg (1989) showed that students' moral reasoning development was significant while comparison group students' moral reasoning showed almost no growth over three years. The democratic school environment appears to be successful in promoting civic involvement and academic achievement, as well as the moral and prosocial development of the students (Markman, 2002). Democratic school students reported feeling responsible for helping

their peers and upholding the rules they had made as a group, whereas comparison students did not feel responsible for their peers or for maintaining school rules (Power et al., 1989).

Method and Participants

Schools that self-identify as democratic were recruited through The Alternative Education Resource Organization (www.educationrevolution.org/index.html). The Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO) is a non-profit organization founded to advance learner-centered approaches to education. The AERO website contains a list of 70 democratic school websites within the United States. This list includes schools that have described themselves as democratic, or have been described as democratic by researchers. Principals/directors of democratic schools were e-mailed an online survey. This survey asked schools to identify the democratic practices implemented within their school and how these practices were created in light of the bureaucratic nature of traditional schools. Eleven of the 70 schools on the AERO web site had out-of-date contact information so 59 schools were sent the online survey. Of the 59 schools, 23 schools returned a completed survey for a response rate of 39%.

Results

Data Analysis

To examine schools' responses, a recursive analysis investigated underlying themes in the data (Nastasi, 1998). Responses to the open ended questions were descriptively coded across different school types (alternative schools and free schools). After the coding was finalized, frequencies were calculated to represent the number of schools that mentioned each category. Next, data were analyzed across school type (alternative and free). Finally, the categories were rank ordered, based on the number of schools that mentioned that category, across alternative schools and free schools, and since the rank order implies the salience of each category, the rank ordered lists were then compared for similarities and differences (Ryan & Bernard, 2000).

Sample Description

All principals/directors were asked to describe their school. Six schools (4 public, 2 private) described themselves as an "alternative school" where students participate in democratic decision making and governance but take a typical curriculum found in traditional schools. Alternative school populations ranged from 42 students to 265 students. Seventeen schools (all private) described themselves as a "free school" where students participated in democratic decision making and governance but were free to pursue their individual interests for however long and in what ever manner they choose. Free school populations ranged from 5 students to 96 students. Several free schools claimed that enrollment varied from year to year and some schools said they enrolled "part-time" students but did not elaborate on what constituted a part-time student.

Two of the alternative schools enrolled children K-12 and 4 enrolled only high school students. The free schools varied greatly in their students' ages and most did not report grade levels claiming their school was not set up as a traditional school where students were broken up into grades. Eleven free schools enrolled students K-12 or 5 to 19 years of age; 1 enrolled only high school students (14 to 18 years); 2 enrolled only middle and high school students (10 to 18 years); 2 enrolled only elementary and middle school students (5 to 14 years); and 1 enrolled only elementary school students (5 to 11 years).

Program Descriptions

School principals/directors were asked to describe the practices their school implements to address: 1) shared decision making among students and staff, 2) a learner-centered approach, 3) equality among students and staff, and 4) the community as an extension of the classroom.

For shared decision making among students and staff, the majority answer was weekly meetings with all staff and students where each member of the community has one vote for each issue raised. The alternative schools, however, were much more detailed in their answers. In the alternative schools there

were several more committees involved in the democratic process such as agenda committees where students vote as to what issues will be put on the weekly meeting agenda. Advisor meeting or small group meetings with advisors were also described. Also, there were a number of other committees that student could be on such as attendance committees, committees to help other troubled students, and planning committees of various sorts where students had a say in the planning of activities. Several free schools were not specific in their answers and just claimed that there was shared decision making among students and staff but did not specify how that was created. A few free schools simply said that shared decision making was a product of one person, one vote.

Table 1
Shared Decision Making Among Students and Staff

Response	Alternative Schools (n = 6)		Free Schools (n = 17)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Weekly school meeting	6	100%	8	47%
Weekly advisor meetings	3	50%		
Other committee meetings	2	33%	1	6%
One-person-one-vote			3	18%

The creation of a learner-centered approach to education varied greatly between free schools and alternative schools. Several schools, however, did not specify how they created a learner-centered approach. The central theme of the alternative schools was that students assisted in the development of classes and class themes, and that there was an expectation of student involvement within each class. The free schools varied greatly among themselves. Some schools required that students engage in internships and create portfolios based on their interests. Other schools had no requirements or curriculum and allowed the students to spend their time as they wished. Some schools allowed the student to create their own curriculum and some schools did not require students to go to class or engage in educational activities if the student did not “feel like it that day.” The free school philosophy could be summed up by one school: “Learning is a by-product of practicing life each and every day.”

Table 2
A Learner-Centered Approach

Response	Alternative Schools (n = 6)		Free Schools (n = 17)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Student input on classes	3	50%		
Expectations of student involvement	1	17%		
Students develop curriculum			2	12%
No curriculum			2	12%
Students pursue their own interests			7	41%
Consensus among students and staff			2	12%

There was not much difference between the alternative schools and the free schools in terms of creating equality among staff and students. The overarching theme in all schools was one-person-one-vote. All members of the school had the opportunity to vote on numerous aspects of the school community and teachers' and students' votes were equal. Schools also explicitly expressed that teachers did not have "veto" power over student decisions. Another overarching theme was the creation of a student-led judicial system where students can solve problems and give out consequences to students who break the school rules. Many schools expressed that teachers did not have more authority than the students to give out consequences for rule-breaking and that all consequences were decided by the judicial committee where, once again, each community member had one vote and teachers do not have veto power.

Table 3
Equality among Staff and Students

Response	Alternative Schools (n = 6)		Free Schools (n = 17)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
One-person-one-vote/consensus	4	67%	9	53%
Student led judicial system	1	17%	6	35%
Governing rules for "equal rights"			2	12%

In regard to the community as an extension of the classroom, both the free and alternative schools focused on creating good citizens and internships. While the alternative schools focused on community service and the notion of citizenship, the free schools focused on using the community as a classroom. Many free schools encouraged students to explore the outside community on their own or with a teacher to understand their role within the community. Field trips, internships, and community service are a part of the curriculum and student requests to go into the community are granted and encouraged. Several free schools saw no distinction between the classroom and the community and replied that the community is the classroom and not an extension of the classroom.

Table 4
The Community as an Extension of the Classroom

Response	Alternative Schools (n = 6)		Free Schools (n = 17)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Community service/internships	3	50%	4	24%
Using the community as a classroom/ field trips	2	33%	8	47%
Advocate/protest/campaign for causes			2	12%

School principals/directors were then asked about how their schools reconciled the contradictions between the belief that students should be free to pursue their own interests and goals and the belief that human beings are at their best when they function as a community. There was not a noticeable difference between the alternative schools and the free schools but there was a great difference between schools in general. Some schools saw no contradiction and did not elaborate on their answers. A common response from several schools was that this conflict is reality; it exists within our own democratic

society. The contradiction is openly addressed among students and teachers and the students learn to understand the contradiction from the discussions. When conflicts do arise they are discussed openly and often resolved within the community meetings or small group meetings. Principals/directors saw this as an important learning experience for the students. However, many schools wrote about the “consensus” of the community. These schools have overtly stated their rules and objectives that students should abide by. If students’ individual interests are not inline with the schools objectives, then those students are asked to leave the school.

There were several practices that schools did implement to attempt to resolve this conflict. These practices were primarily discussed by the alternative schools. Possibly, with a larger population it becomes necessary to create such practices to handle conflict. One school gave students the choice; the students could choose to pursue more community oriented goals or more individual goals. Some schools, though, created practices to uniquely integrate community and individual interests. For example, one school made students create individual goals for their community participation. Other schools created student committees that evaluated students’ individual work. These practices combine both community and individual goals while ensuring that no individual student is ostracized for their individual goals or their level of participation.

The final question asked of the principals/directors was about the bureaucratic nature of their schools. The bureaucratic nature of schools can hinder student involvement since the principals and teachers might see such participation as a threat to his or her control of the school. There was a sharp divide between the free schools and the alternative schools. The alternative schools acknowledged the bureaucratic nature of their schools and stated that they “deal with it carefully.” The theme was that new teachers are trained to respect student decisions and rules are well established to protect student decisions. However, most schools did recognize that there are rules for when teachers or administrators can over-rule student decisions. One school admitted “We are not as alternative as we might like, but that is one reason we have existed for 26 years.”

The free schools were able to operate in a very different manner than the alternative schools and this freed them from much of the traditional bureaucracy found in schools. Several free schools simply expressed that they are not afraid of student power or respecting student decisions with one school stating that “the bureaucracy is participatory and transparent.” Several free schools expressed that no single person has control over the school so the control is never threatened. Also, the amount of control given to one person is determined by the school community and “they have control only as long, and only to the extent, as they are given control.” Many free schools wrote that their size affected how the school was run; since they were small, there was no need for administrators and all tasks could be dived up equally among staff and students. One school did admit that “as we get bigger, we’ll have to adopt new ways of decision making.” Unlike the alternative schools, no free school discussed the creation of rules to minimize the bureaucracy or to train teachers how to respect student decision-making.

The final theme that emerged in both free and alternative schools was the basic idea of democracy; one person, one vote, and how this was the basic component that their school community was created. Since this democratic principle is respected, the bureaucracy is kept to a minimum. However, one school admitted that “sometimes human nature can get in the way.”

Discussion

This study attempted to describe some of the practices that democratic schools implement and how shared-decision making in such schools is able to prevail over the bureaucratic nature of traditional schools. A clear distinction was found between alternative and free schools. These differences help us understand what a democratic school looks like and can help us understand the meaning of the complex concept of democracy.

Differences between Alternative and Free Schools

The first major consideration is whether the school is a “public” school or a “private” school. It could be that many of the differences between the alternative and free schools could actually be a difference between public and private schools. For example, there were differences between alternative schools and free schools in regard to the creation of a learner-centered approach to education. Alternative school students did not have a lot of input into *what* they learned but rather had a lot of input into *how* they learned demonstrating the schools’ need to abide by a state-regulated curriculum. This is in contrast to the free schools, which took a much more laissez faire approach to teaching and allowed student to choose how, what, and when to learn.

The difference between public and private schools was also evident in the differences in the bureaucratic nature of the schools. Alternative schools, being public institutions, have not done away with the bureaucracy but instead have teachers and administrators willing to follow student leadership. This suggests that there is still a strong bureaucratic nature to these schools that teachers still have to abide by. This is in sharp contrast with the free schools, which were not bound to a larger school district or education establishment. This means that the schools were created without an existing bureaucratic structure in place. The establishment of rules and the training of teachers in the alternative schools seem like a logical step to ensure democratic participation from students.

Another important consideration appears to be the size of the school. This was evident in the ways the schools implemented shared decision making among students and staff. For example, alternative schools created many smaller committees for student involvement and decision making. The alternative schools had much larger student populations than the free schools, which might require smaller committee meetings rather than one large meeting to ensure that all students get a chance to participate in shared decision making.

The size of the schools also appears to affect how schools used the community as an extension of the classroom. A focus for both the free schools and alternative schools was on creating good citizens but how the schools went about this was quite different. The alternative schools focused on community service, which was expected to augment lessons in the classroom. The free schools, in contrast, focused on using the community as a classroom. In this sense, the community was the primary place of learning and not a lesson to augment what was learned in the classroom. The differences between public and private schools are once again raised. Since alternative schools have to adhere to a particular curriculum, there might be more of a focus on students doing well on standardized test, rather than on experiential education. Free schools, less bound but such curricular restrictions, can use the community as a classroom instead of an extension of the classroom.

Similarities between Alternative and Free Schools

There was not much difference between the alternative schools and the free schools in terms of creating equality among staff and students. There was an overarching theme of one person, one vote, which was well respected and upheld in both types of schools. This appears to be the foundation by which all schools were created and was the one common theme found in every school. Educators and researchers interested in what a democratic school looks like should focus on this element as a starting point. However, more information is needed on this practice. Such questions as “how often do students and staff vote?” “what are the issues students get to vote on?” and “are student and staff votes publicly known or is it a private ballot?” need to be asked.

There was not a noticeable difference between the alternative schools and the free schools on how their schools reconciled the contradictions between the belief that students should be free to pursue their own interests and the belief that human beings are at their best when they function as a community. Free and alternative schools expect students to be individuals and be free to create individual goals and individual interests. However, the ambiguity of this freedom led to a great deal of trouble in the free school movement and the eventual demise of most of them. This ambiguity arose from the schools’ expectation that students be a part of a democratic community and share decision-making power for the

entire community. Being part of a community often means sacrificing some of your individual freedom. Schools varied greatly in how they helped resolve this issue. On the one end, some schools did not acknowledge that there was a problem. On the other end, some schools openly discussed the issue in group meetings and classes since such a contraction exists within our own society. However, other schools responded that their school has overtly stated rules and objectives that students must abide by. If students' individual interests are not inline with the schools objectives, then those students are asked to leave the school. This practice seems to be solving the contraction by removing the persons whose individual goals are causing the conflict rather than address the issues of the conflict. It also seems to be placing a focus on group conformity.

Implications

Democracy is a complex concept. It becomes even more complex when we attempt to create democratic practices in an autocratic environment such as schools. So what does a democratic school look like? It appears to vary greatly depending on several variables. This makes defining school democracy difficult. But this paper has attempted to begin that process and points to a clear distinction between two types of schools; alternative and free schools or public and private schools. Such a distinction will help us to understand what democratic schools look like. But this also demonstrates the important need to tease apart the differences between "democracy" and "freedom." It appears that many free schools claimed to be democratic because students were able to decide what they learned, how they learned, and even *if* they learned. We have to decide if such practices truly constitute democracy. However, all schools mentioned the rule of one person, one vote. Possibly, to know what a democratic schools looks like we have to start with this rule and then proceed from there depending on the structural differences in the schools. However, we must be cautious in simply stating that one person, one vote makes a school democratic. All of the schools in this study emphasized more than just voting; they emphasized true respect for differences and a real appreciation for students' and teachers' voices. In that regard, it's not enough to just allow students to vote on issues but rather schools must create a culture of caring and trust among the students and staff to ensure truly open discussion and debates of justice and fairness. This would appear to be a particular challenge for many public alternative schools. These challenges arise from these schools having to operate within an existing bureaucratic structure, being bound by curricular standards, and having much larger student populations. In essence, many free schools were created outside of the typical school structure, in part to avoid such issues. Therefore, we need to understand more about how public alternative schools were created and stayed operating. Understanding how public alternative schools operate, we develop better insight as to how to create democratic school programs that would be available to all students.

While some have attempted to describe democratic schools (i.e., Power et al., 1989; Mosher et al., 1994), these authors described one or two schools that followed a particular philosophy. The attempt of this research was to report on a range of schools with different philosophies and practices. This is the first study that has attempted to investigate the different democratic practices of various democratic schools in a nation-wide study. It is also the first study to compare "alternative" and "free" schools on their philosophies and democratic practices. These are both strengths of the current study.

However, this study is not without its weaknesses. The first is the low response rate of the schools. Schools might not have responded because the principal/director never received the survey. Several surveys had to be sent to general e-mail addresses that were for anyone interested in obtaining information on the school. Some school principals/directors might fear that their responses would be misinterpreted and would cast a negative light on their school. Finally, those schools that did respond might have better established democratic practices and might be more confident in their school's practices. This suggests that there might be some biases in the data presented and that only well established schools with more experienced teachers responded.

Conclusion

Future research on democratic schools should focus on the democratic practices that schools employ and how they affect student outcomes. No research to date, longitudinal or cross sectional, has

investigated the long-term outcomes of attending a democratic school. This could be a reason for why there are so few democratic schools operating today. Without systematic research demonstrating positive student outcomes, educators and policy makers have little reason to support democratic schools.

In conclusion, the field of education needs more systematic, rigorous, empirical research on the effects of democratic schooling. We need to understand effective ways to create such schools and we need to understand how these schools positively affect their students. With a better understand of the practices that existing democratic schools employ, we can better understand their effect on students, and start demonstrating to educational administrators and policy makers that more democratic schools should be created.

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