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Democracy in Education:

values of democratic schooling

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## Introduction

Over the course of the history of the United States writers and teachers have engaged with and researched many kinds of education. Some of these models are a “traditional model” used in current public schooling, the Montessori model used at many private schools across the country and a wide array of methods that are employed at the many charter schools. One movement of schooling that has in many ways been rejected by the country and struggles to maintain legitimacy in the mainstream is the “free schooling” movement (Chertoff). The general philosophy for these schools is to place the student at the front of the learning and try to allow them to create their own value system on what kind of information is important. Even though the popularity of free schooling is not what it was in the 1960’s there are still schools that could be categorized as “free-schools” or more accurately a sub-category of free schools coined “Sudbury” schools. One that is notably successful is, Sudbury Valley School in Framingham Massachusetts. A critical component of these Sudbury schools is their democratic systems for the students to participate (Chertoff). “Sudbury” schools operate so that all members of the school meeting, which is the voting cohort, have a vote that are all equally valuable. It is a direct democracy placed in a school where the students outnumber the hired staff (Chertoff). This type of structure in a school is wildly different from what we have in our public-school system, or most private schools. However, the incorporation of democratic institutions within a school should not be dismissed away due to their abnormality and is likely to have positive effects on education.

Democracy and democratic institutions are very natural to Americans. The country was founded on a belief that democracy was in many ways the solution to the tyrannical control the founders felt that England had over them. The enormous value the United States places on democracy is obvious as you look through the history of the nation. The values that democracy has are also extensively written about by political philosophers and celebrated globally. Some believe it is essential for a self-actualized life and others that it is the most effective form of promoting the common-good (Brink)(Swift). I believe that the values that democracy has in a governmental setting would transition well into an educational setting. Throughout this paper I will be discussing various values of democracy and explore impacts of them in an educational setting or institution. I will show that the United States specifically has embraced democratic ideals and its incorporation into school may not be so radical. Additionally, I will show the methods of punishment in modern day schooling and the way that problems that arise may be in part from the rejection of student involvement the school administration operate in.

### “Educated” in a democracy

Before addressing the validity of a pedagogical shift a few things must first be established. Good schooling is crucial to the proper functioning of society; this seems to be particularly true in democratic nations when information and thus control are decentralized. It follows that a good democracy requires a robust and effective form of education that all members of the public have access to; without this the population may be manipulated and taken advantage of. This was a point many founders of the United States believed are argued

for (Adams). However, a point of contention throughout nearly all of human history is, what is education? Or, more importantly, what is an educated person? We can see the state in modern times valuing STEM based education and a focus on standardized testing (Slouka)(Sacks). While in a different time subjects may have been history of a nation, religious values or writing ability. The location and mode of education has also shifted, from the home to the classroom, or more recently the classroom to the web; this is obvious but notable. The U.S. creating robust STEM education does likely create a larger base of science knowledge in a country and this certainly would have beneficial effects. But, when we create national values for one set of disciplines, the sciences and math, we are in effect diminishing our societies importance on others. I do not intend to make the claim that society should value humanity fields over fields based in science. They are both enormously important for a well-rounded knowledge in the public and needed for furthering our society generally. I do find this distinction of how societal value in education overtime shifts to be important to identify and reflect on. It shows us that we have evolved in how we educate the public over time, additionally, it shows that what is important to know in throughout history changes. In other words, it shows us that over time what an educated person is, from societies perspective, shifts.

Additionally, formal education may have two philosophies on education. They can view it in terms of a means to an end, or an end in itself. If you were to participate in a schooling environment with one of these goals it would have a profoundly different impact on your education and topics you learned depending on which one. This is extremely easy to imagine. An obvious example of using education as a means to an end is to look at trade schools. In a trade school your sole purpose of schooling is to acquire a skill and use that skill to participate

in the work force. A school attempting to educate as an end in itself would not be like this.

Using education as an end is placing the reason for education on the act of education itself, not a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. When you consider the philosophy of free schools it seems more likely that they are treating education as an end rather than a means. These are clearly fundamentally different educational experiences and would require different forms and structures to best operate.

When you consider these facts namely, education has shifted and what educational institutions philosophical ideas differ, it creates a more reasonable claim for the incorporation of new educational systems and structures, namely democracy. Additionally, the fact that we are currently using some specified system in our public education does not mean that is the best system we could be using. I do not think many would argue that our current model is the quintessence of public education. I am also not here to say that the Sudbury model of education is the ideal model. What I do believe however is that our nation's current emphasis is on testing ability and economic viability and it is not sustainable, and it is arguable inhuman. When using the phrase economic viability, I am referencing our school's goals being tailored by corporate needs. The value we place on STEM does not come from a belief that a population with a large and diffuse base knowledge of STEM fields will have increased quality of life or that it fulfills some intrinsic human need. It comes from a need for growth in our economic systems and from that a need for constant innovation. These qualities, however valuable, do not have all the traits all people need in their educational experiences.

Another aspect of public-school development, which should be attributed to the model, is punishment mechanisms. Recently, Thomas Mowen authored a paper on the

““criminalization” of school discipline” (Mowen p832). The paper identifies that with the onset of zero tolerance programs we saw increase in our schools punishing “normal childhood behavior” (Mowen p834). This seems problematic when coupled with the reality that when students are harshly punished the odds of them dropping out increases (Mowen p833). The remainder of Mowen’s paper displays the disparities in received punishments between white and minority populations, along with collateral consequences (Mowen). Democratization of punishment method may alleviate these problems. Within the Sudbury model, the school’s discipline is done through the Judicial Committee which is highly comparable to our own court and legal system. It is a system that is run on case law precedent and legislative rules from the School Meeting. It is also operated by a jury of the offender’s peers (Wilson, Neoliberal, p174). Given the fact that we are seeing traditional schools enact disciplinary measures on what is claimed to be “normal childhood behavior”, it seems likely that if in a scenario that a jury of peers who are normal children see this type of behavior they would deem it to be normal and not enact punishments. Additionally, it creates an opportunity of discussion, a value of democracy that we will address shortly.

As we can see the problems we are facing within public incorporated and traditional schooling models are somewhat robust and multifaceted. However, we should not shy away from nonstandard solutions simply due to their difference from the status quo. Democracy is something that we have already collectively decided to prove valuable for a multitude of things. Incorporation of some of its mechanisms into schooling structures seems to be predictably beneficial.

## The American ethos and Democracy

Democracy can be described as a system of governance and decision making through a dispersion of power into the group in terms of voting rights. Decisions on rules and finance of a group may be determined through this democratic system. It is a system that is beloved by many around the world and is the established method of governance in many nations. In America we can see the values of democracy worn like a badge of honor by many who consider themselves patriotic. Democracy is truly woven into the American ethos. The love that Americans, seem to have for democratic institutions and the idea of voting rights is called for. Political philosophers have written about various values that democracy has and reasons it may be the ideal form of government structure (Swift). Within a country that has such a large value placed on democratic ideals it is somewhat shocking to see its attempted restriction to the political arena. There are of course instances of cooperative's, which may use democratic structures. Or labor unions that have these structures as well. However, the United States has more recently taken aims at busting unions and public interest in cooperative businesses is somewhat minimal and isolated to specific regions or communities.

Democratic structures have gains that many have pointed to. Adam Swift wrote about various instrumental and intrinsic values that democracy supports or protects. I will explain some of these and show how they are valuable and should be considered important to be present in all people's lives, not simply those of age to vote and participate in national levels of democracy. Additionally, some of these should not simply be afforded to the student population out of some ethical belief that humans should have them, they may have true

benefit that could improve student outcome. Specifically, some of the instrumental benefits we see in democracy should be crucial goals for any educational establishment.

The first value is self-realization. In this setting self-realization is referencing fulfilling your full humanity. Swift points out how one of the most distinct aspects of humankind is our ability for collective decision making (Swift p208). Since this is a human-wide and human-specific trait it is an essential trait for fully engaging with your own humanity. That is to say, if we ignore the aspects of humans that differentiate us from other species, we are failing to fully realize our self and are not able to embrace what it is to be a whole human. The type of engagement that Swift contends is 'self-realization' comes directly from the deliberation and engagement with others in your community on moral questions that occur in democracies.

This property seems highly valuable in an educational setting and is present in the Sudbury model. We can see from one example noted by Peter Gray, this type of democratic conversation, which enables self-realization, being beneficial for the community of students. He recounts a student who was wearing a jacket with a swastika patch on it (Chertoff). This seems obviously offensive to us, and with some certainty we could imagine swift and aggressive punishments in a public school. However, at this time the school had no rules specifically saying this was against the rules. There was an eventual school meeting that took place on the discussion of implementing this type of rule and a restriction of all of their right to free speech (Chertoff). This was a conversation primarily consisting of students with the age ranges of 4-18. In the recount he said the conversation was robust and consisted of historical importance of the symbol along with other symbols and ideological connotations like the hammer and sickle (Chertoff). As Swift says, "only in a democracy do all citizens get to participate fully in political



life.” (Swift p208). The kind of deliberation produces new ideas in the heads of the participants, they have developed more complex ideas on their stance on a variety of different things. Nazism, free speech, clothing choice, majority rule or fairness to name some. This conversation is central to their functioning due to its involvement with free speech within the school. This all promotes challenges and struggles for the students they must internalize and reason with and though this promote a self-realization process.

Additionally, this display of democratic and peer-based punishment seems valuable when considering the current mode of authoritarian-esq punishment mechanisms in public school. If it is the case, as Mowen’s research suggests, that students have a higher likely hood of dropping out if they face severe punishments we must attempt to limit those punishments to the best of our capacity. Creating a space for large and multifaceted conversation, one that is present in democratic institutions, may provide invaluable to maintain student engagement with an education establishment at any level. Two other values fit well into Gray’s school meeting recollection, namely, perceived legitimacy and intellectual and moral development of citizens.

Perceived legitimacy is the belief that the treatment you are being subjected to is fair and just (Swift p219-21). If you believe a government or law to be legitimate, you are believing that the law or government has justified and fair reasons for its actions or implementation. In the example Gray gave, there is a catalyst event that sparks community interest in a new rule. The community members all gather and discuss the potential implementation of a new rule. The participants will see all those they share the community with and will directly see where it is that these rules come from, in the instance of its creation. They see the faces of those who

want the rules, the reasoning they have and the emotions of those involved. This seems likely to prompt a belief that the rule in question is legitimate. This would likely cause a larger respect or understanding for those rules and give opportunity for students to challenge rules they feel are not legitimate and discuss with their peers.

The final value I will be reviewing is intellectual and moral development of “citizens” (Swift p218). I am using the word citizens in an imprecise way here. The citizenry of a democratic school would be the student population, as well as the attending staff. The event of school meeting clearly displays this kind of value or benefit. Grey specifically noted how there was a lengthy conversation of the legitimacy of free speech rules (Chertoff). He claimed that the discussion was, “worth of the Supreme Court” (Chertoff). I am not sure if I believe the content of the meeting was equal to that we might see in a SCOTUS hearing. However, the value of a nuanced conversation over the right to speak freely is clear when considering intellectual and moral development. The pushing and pulling of different opinions on the discussion floor would mold and challenge perspectives. Younger students would be hearing from others that are years older, that they view as equal due to their full representation, and gain insight into a more their attitudes and opinions on critical issues. This would create vast opportunities for engagement with challenging ideas engagement with ideas. It becomes clear after reflection that a democratized school would continue to allow and promote this value.

When you consider how traditional education addresses or fulfills these four values, it seems that they are diminished or simply not present. We do not see peer-based punishment systems, we do not see self-realization properties. At least not to the same caliber we see in discussion and argument over rights and personal beliefs at the democratic alternative. We do

not see mechanisms to promote perceived legitimacy, this is glaringly obvious when addressing the research Mowen references and utilizes (Mowen). Intellectual and moral development would be present in traditional school. However, they would be mostly restricted to a classroom setting. The lecturing format of a classroom is certainly valuable for intellectual development. However, when attempting to develop ethical values and have moral growth that fit into a community it seems likely that incorporation of a robust conversation system, like the school meeting setting, we would see a good area for this kind of growth and develop in a less hierarchical and single solution way. Additionally, when you compare numbers of undergraduates in philosophy degrees versus those in computer science degrees it seems obvious that there is not a large portion of students interested in learning ethics in a formal setting (Data USA). Due to importance of this kind of thinking it lends the question of if we need to create better options for this kind of learning.

I have listed four qualities of democracy that have some serious merit to them. I have also shown that when placed in a school these qualities seem to transition well and create more “legitimate” punishment and rule creation mechanism. These qualities also have been shown to create learning opportunities that are pertinent specifically to American ideals of freedom and autonomy.

### A Distinct Challenge

The most compelling challenge of this kind of structure is basic and not surprising.

It revolves around developmental psychology and Kohlberg's six stages of social growth and social ideas (Sharf). The argument can be summarized as this; these schools are often K-12 environments, and due to the large age gaps there are large developmental differences in the voting group in terms of their social aptitude or social understanding (Sharf). That gap is present even when you ignore the age difference between youngest student and staff. This difference is categorized from one to six, six being the most socially "developed." There is no need to discuss the specifics of each stage, the fundamentals are this. At stage one people have a "orientation towards punishment and obedience. Law is conceived as the force of the powerful to which the weaker submit" (Sharf p91). The stages progressively change towards a more nuanced and ethics enforced understanding of why laws and punishment mechanisms exist (Sharf p91). The concept would be, as you age you move up through the stages and some people do not even reach stage six (Sharf). Sharf describes it as this, "Each stage offers a more comprehensive notion of society and its relationship to individual rights" (Sharf p91). This creates an idea that young students do not have the social aptitude for participating in democratic structures due to their inability to have nuanced ideas. If you follow this idea, in a system when the majority of participants are seen as lower stages on Kohlberg's tiers. Sharf argues this would cause system failures in the school due to an inability to fully engage and any engagement would be at a lower level. In a full democratic structure, it seems a couple situations logically follow that if this were the case. First, the school would fail in economic terms as well due to the inability for total student control. The student population would not have the social connectivity on why budgets must be set a particular way, or why tuition must rise. Second, rules would become very bad at maintaining order or they would not enable a full

protection of each students' rights within the school. However, I would contend these do not happen. It seems clear that through the success and longevity of schools like Summerhill and Sudbury Valley School it is not the case that schools will fail due to "under" developed social skills and ethical understanding.

Additional, Sharf identifies something that is in fact massive reason we should be encouraging democratic schooling. In the article Sharf says, "It has long been established that participation in democratically organized institutions is associated with rapid social development" (Sharf p91). This seems to be a clear benefit to allowing younger students to be involved with democratic structures. If our concern is that if students are underdeveloped socially, creating an environment that has "long been established" to encourage that exact growth would be beneficial.

### Conclusion

Education creates the populations beliefs. It creates the ideological backbone for a nation. We currently run the United States public education system with a focus on STEM learning with an apparent goal to promote this knowledge in the public. It is also structured in a way that provides little opportunity for students to participate in the conversation on what it is they must know and seems to be developing over the top and destructive punishment mechanisms. The end result of this is a population that has high value in having knowledge in the sciences, while disregarding other fields. This type of educational model seems to neglect what many American values are; Autonomy and the pursuit of the good life are two glaring examples. A student is not afforded the right of autonomy in a system that tells you what the

values are and how exactly you must exemplify them and it becomes hard to identify what they might view the good life for those same reasons. I have reviewed an argument for the incorporation of democratic structures into school. Democratic systems are long held as a champion for governmental structure due to the control the citizens hold and the benefits the system gives to the participants. I have argued that these benefits do not go away when we incorporate them into school and may be very important factors for correcting some of the critical failures, we see in modern day public education.

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