

## The Democratic Class: Social Infrastructure Developing Social Architects

**By Darrol Bussler**

During the past year, I have conducted an experiment with students in my teacher education classes and with community leaders in workshops. Participants are divided into small groups and told that their group is now the cabinet of education in one of three countries: Cuba, Libya, or Iraq. Their task is to determine the qualities and characteristics their systems will develop in students in order to become citizens under Castro, Gaddafi, or Hussein. The responses are consistently the same: develop students to accept and to do what they are told, not to think for themselves, not to question, and to be passive. It is the next step that becomes alarming. Participants are asked to raise their hands if they believe a major part of their education experience has been as the one they described for their dictatorial system. Nearly all hands are raised, every time. That is the nature of the problem that causes me to raise a question: are our school systems, generally, developing citizens to function in a dictatorial society rather than a democratic society? In this article I propose a theoretical framework for the practice of democratic decision-making by teachers with students as a basis for learning. The framework has been developed

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through practice in elementary, secondary, and university classes, and in community groups.

The problem identified above is not new. William H. Kilpatrick (1940), colleague of John Dewey, saw the problem over 50 years ago when he stated: “As it is, school-room and school system are but too often benevolent autocracies. A line-and-staff administration, borrowed from the army, seeks to turn out a mass production of learning, essentially on a factory basis” (p. 3). My students tell me that the majority of their educational experiences are as Kilpatrick described 50 years ago: autocratic as the army and factory-like, resulting in passivity in the learning process.

There is evidence that indicates that how we are schooling may be a cause for producing passive Americans in our democratic process of government. First, let us consider evidence of passivity in the democratic process and then consider a possible cause. Henry G. Cisneros (1991), while serving as president of the National Civic League<sup>1</sup> in 1991, reported that “...only 40 percent of Americans eligible to vote do so in General Elections—down from 85 percent in 1952. It is a source of shame that fewer young people have voted in every election, every year, consistently since 1972” (pp. 10-11). A conclusion about the cause may be drawn from research that indicates a possible correlation between experiences as a student and later behavior as an adult. René Hersrud (1991) reports on research which indicates that “...students who actively participate in the discussion and resolution of problems at classroom, school, and community levels are more likely to participate in the democratic process as adults and to develop more accurate social perceptions which ground their thinking about the social and political environment” (p. 22).

The past experiences of passivity in the learning process reported by my students and the statistics cited by Cisneros provide the basis for a challenge. We return to Kilpatrick (1940) who defined the challenge:

Only as it [democracy] is lived can it be learned. Specifically, every school procedure must embody democracy, and all concerned with any decision should share, actually, in the making of it. On this basis alone should teachers work and pupils study. From these various considerations we conclude that democracy is a faith not yet thoroughly accepted, a hope as yet only partially justified, and a program that largely remains to be made. What is thus lacking exactly defines our duty. (p.3)

Kilpatrick’s reference to learning democracy by living democracy is an echo from earlier writings of T.V. Smith and Eduard C. Lindeman (1926) who advanced the ideals of democracy in *The Democratic Way of Life*. They concluded their discussion with seven propositions, the final one relating to democracy and education: “The modern democratic way of life can be realized in this age of self-consciousness only if its precepts and way of living are incorporated in the educational system” (p. 148).

From the preceding references we may conclude: if society is to be democratic, schools must be democratic. From the perspective of reconstructionist philosophy, a dual challenge is in order: change our schools to change our society.

### Reconstructionist Philosophy and Restructuring

Reconstructionist philosophy, by its very name, implies attention to structure; more specifically, restructuring with an accompanying action to achieve change. Reconstructionists Theodore Brameld and George S. Counts referred to the dual challenge. Brameld (1950), considered the primary spokesperson for reconstructionism, referred to the needed change in school structure when he stated that "...our central contention [is] that America can no longer afford to accept as satisfactory the prevailing structure of its schools, and therefore that some kind of new structure must be erected in its place" (p. 2). Earlier (1932), Counts called for a change in societal structure by having the school build a new social order in *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* The reconstructionists' call for change in school structure and change in societal structure provides the basis for two structural metaphors proposed in this article as a framework for decision-making from planning to evaluation of action.

The first metaphor is **infrastructure**. Just as we refer to physical infrastructure such as roads, water and sewer systems, parks, and public buildings as a basis for community development, so I propose that we develop the **social infrastructure** in our classrooms as a basis for development of change in school and society.

The second metaphor refers to the people in this infrastructure. I propose that we view these individuals—students and teachers in the classroom, and citizens in the community—as **social architects** who serve as the agents of change in developing and working in the **social infrastructure** of our classrooms and society.

Basic to understanding the infrastructure for a democratic class is a definition of democracy and a review of the research base for that definition.

### Definition and Research Base

For many Americans, democracy is a household word, and time is usually not taken to define household words since it is assumed that everyone knows their meaning. In regard to the meaning of democracy there is not a clear common understanding. Evidence to support this assertion is consistently reported by my graduate students who randomly ask several people to explain or to define democracy. They are asked not only to note the verbal responses but to observe non-verbal reactions.

Students report that the majority of the responses relate to voting, the majority rules, and government of, by and for the people. Beyond that, there is no common basis for definition in the responses which students report. Reactions of interviewees raise a question. Students report that there is a tendency for interviewees to not

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maintain eye contact when responding to the question. Some students discover that when they begin to write the verbal response on a pad, interviewees react with statements such as “Don’t write that down...yet.” Is the tendency not to maintain eye contact and not wanting their response to be written an indication that they are uncertain? Without exception, the students come to conclude that most of the people they interview cannot explain or define democracy.

The confusion is not without reason. One cause for confusion is evident in a film series produced by Democracy Films Limited (1989) entitled “The Struggle for Democracy.” In one part, the host takes viewers to three countries, each country reporting it is a democracy: Libya, East Germany, and the United States. After observing practices referred to as democracy in these three countries, it appears safe to conclude that three different views exist, specifically, in the relationship of citizens to the authority of the state. How does one define it?

If we encourage teachers to implement democratic classes, the basis for practice must be grounded in definition. The following definition is offered:

Democracy is the practice of a social, ethical process of mutual influence in decision-making toward positive ends for self and society.

A key word in this definition is **social**, since it is the basis for the process of influence in a democratic class. In short, a reconstructionist explains the democratic way as “social democracy.” A European colleague has suggested that a better word choice might be “sociable democracy,” indicating that participants are *soc able* (Latin root *soc: societas*, being associated in common purpose; *sociare*, to share; *socius*, partner). The emphasis upon “ability” appears noteworthy since the research base for this article is based on the concept of sociability.

The research base for social democracy, as described in this article, is rooted in the 19th-century classical work of Russian Prince Peter Kropotkin. The intent of Kropotkin’s research was to support Spencer’s “survival of the fittest,” a phrase based on Darwin’s view. However, Kropotkin’s research of insects, birds, and mammals, along with research of human groups ranging from savages to 19th-century life, resulted in a different conclusion. According to Kropotkin (1902): “I failed to find—although I was eagerly looking for it—that bitter struggle for the means of existence, among animals belonging to the same species, which was considered by most Darwinists (though not always by Darwin himself) as the dominant characteristic of struggle for life, the main factor of evolution” (p. vii). Rather than the struggle for existence as **the** main factor of evolution, Kropotkin concluded that cooperation, or “mutual aid” (sociability), among animals belonging to the same species or society was as much a law of nature as mutual struggle, or competition. Indeed, Kropotkin offers countless examples in which sociability, which manifests itself in cooperation, is the dominant factor. Kropotkin observed that those species with the highest sociability were those with the greatest numbers; sociability appeared to be a basis for survival. The thesis of his work may be concluded as follows:

the greater the sociability of a species, the greater its intelligence; the greater its intelligence, the greater its chance for survival.

In other words, the more we talk to each other, the smarter we can become; the smarter we become, the greater chance we have to make it. Although Kropotkin's research was done 100 years ago, it continues to be accepted and used. For example, sociologist Alfie Kohn in *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* (1986) refers to Kropotkin directly and echoes Kropotkin's theme of sociability as a basis for development and survival (p. 21).

Sociability, or what I term "the social factor," plays a significant role in the democratic class. The social factor determines the nature of relationships, more specifically, the means of social control. When I introduce the democratic class concept in classes and workshops, I ask participants if they see a relationship between control and democracy. The initial response from participants is that they do not see a relationship, but do see one between a dictatorial system and control. In order to assist participants to understand the social factor and its relationship to social control, the following comparison has been helpful in pointing out that democracy *is* a form of control and that implementing a democratic class requires a form of social control:

**Social Factor in Three Forms of Social Control**

<b>dictatorship</b> (autocratic) social factor: low to none	<b>democracy</b> (democratic) social factor: high	<b>laissez-faire</b> (permissive) social factor: low to none
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It should be noted that the three forms of social control are being represented in their absolute form with the realization that there can be, and usually are, relative degrees of the other forms within each, as will become evident in the discussion of social control in the democratic class later in this article.

In the three forms of social control presented above, the degree of the social factor is indicated. A dictatorship, generally, wants no interference from the public and those in a laissez-faire system want no interference from the government; in their absolute form, these means of social control are anti-social. In contrast, one could say that democracy thrives on "interference"; that is, it thrives on being social in order to achieve the best possible outcomes. Democracy is based on the idea that each individual has a fair chance to influence decisions, that those in the minority have the right to challenge those in authority in order to influence decisions. Democracy is based on the idea that more intelligent decisions are possible through the interchange of diverse ideas. **Kropotkin's theme is evident: the more social, the more intelligent.**

The reference to the social factor leads to a discussion on the role of the teacher. In order to help students examine the teacher's role, I've developed the "Teacher-Student Relationship Model" that becomes a visual means to show how we influ-

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ence and are influenced. For teachers, it can be a quick test to determine their primary form of social control—their relationship with their students.

The model is based on grammar. We know that prepositions are the relationship words in the parts of speech, such as over, from, around, through. If Sally gives the ball to Tom, then the preposition **to** shows the relationship of the ball to Sally and Tom, and the preposition will probably give some indication about the relationship between Sally and Tom.

In the “Teacher-Student Relationship Model” there are three choices of prepositions: **to**, **for**, **with**. In the classroom my choice reveals my relationship with my students. I can choose to do things **to students**, **for students**, or **with students**. If I consistently choose to do things **to or for students**, I have moved in the direction of a dictatorial, autocratic form of social control. If I consistently choose to do things **with students**, I have moved in the direction of a democratic form of social control. In the **to** or **for** position, the social factor is low to none; in the **with** position, the social factor is high.

#### **Teacher-Student Relationship Model**

<b>to</b> students dictatorial/autocratic social factor: low to none	<b>for</b> students dictatorial/autocratic social factor: low to none	<b>with</b> students democratic social factor: high
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My work in the classroom and community reveals that our present education system is primarily doing things **to** and **for** students. When I asked students and community members which preposition describes their educational experiences, the response is overwhelmingly **to** and **for**. Many participants report that they have never experienced a democratic class.<sup>2</sup> Their reports reflect Howard Flantzer’s view (1993): “Educators see high school students doing hard work, while students see themselves serving hard time” (p. 75).

The preceding discussion provides the basis for a reconstructionist view of social democracy. In a social democracy, the interpersonal relationships are based on the social factor where people do things **with** each other. In a social democracy, mutual influence exists in decision-making toward achieving positive ends for self and others. This decision-making process can begin in the planning stage and continue through the evaluation of action.

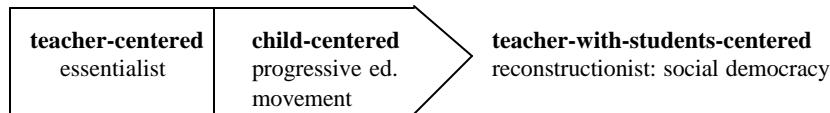
The emphasis on relationship continues in this discussion, more specifically with reference to an historical view of the teacher-student relationship and with a proposal for a more holistic view.

### Teacher-centered, Child-centered: Toward a Holistic Perspective

The movement toward a democratic class indicates that we are shifting to a more holistic perspective of the teacher/student relationship in education. When we scan the history of education we see the traditional role of the teacher as practiced by the essentialists where the focus is on the teacher, resulting in the “teacher-centered classroom.” The shift to pragmatism in the late nineteenth century, and later the progressive education movement in the early twentieth century, brought the focus to the other extreme with attention on the student, resulting in the “child-centered classroom.” From a social democratic perspective, neither of these dualistic polarities is satisfactory since the form of social control is either dictatorial (autocratic) or laissez-faire (permissive). In a social democratic structure, **both** teacher and student are significant in the process of teaching and learning. A new dialectic is needed which reflects a different philosophy from that of the essentialists and early progressives in the progressive education movement.

Viewing the teacher/student relationship from a reconstructionist position, I propose that a social democratic perspective of the teacher/student relationship is a shift from the teacher-centered classroom and the child-centered classroom to the **teacher-with-students-centered classroom**. The plural is a result of the social factor, since both students and the teacher influence each other in decision-making:

#### Toward a Social Democratic Class



One may see the similarity of this perspective in the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1970) as expressed in the following:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student **with** [emphasis added] students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. (p. 67)

The teacher-with-students-centered classroom reflects some basic principles in critical pedagogy. For example, David W. Livingstone in *Critical Pedagogy and Cultural Power* (1987) refers to the essence of critical pedagogy as the “...empowerment of subordinate groups through shared understanding of the social construction of reality” (p. 8). The teachers-with-students-centered classroom seeks to

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“empower a subordinate group,” the students, which departs from the essentialist position where power rests with the teacher, and departs from the child-centered classroom since power, teaching, and learning are “shared.” Livingstone goes on to state that in critical pedagogy there are “...practical engagements in educating oneself and others, and acting upon this knowledge in particular social settings” (p. 223). The critical pedagogy emphasis on “educating oneself” and “acting in social settings” reflects the importance which reconstructionists place on self-responsibility in learning as well as carrying learning into action, both in the school and in the society.

Basic to “acting in social settings” is decision-making which moves our discussion to an examination of the social infrastructure which is necessary for decision-making by teachers with students.

### **Social Infrastructure**

The social infrastructure for a democratic class has four components: **philosophy, resources, structure, and authority**. Our discussion begins with philosophy, based on the view that our beliefs and values should influence our actions.

**Philosophy:** The philosophy for the social infrastructure of a democratic class is based on the social ethic of democracy in which there is a dual focus: the integrity of the individual and the integrity of the group. This view is expressed in reconstructionist thought beginning with Dewey (1916), who viewed democracy as “an order of social relationships dedicated to the promotion of the individual and collective interest of common folk” (p. 82). Brameld (1956) held a similar view:

Democracy is both individual and social. Each personality needs the greatest possible equality of opportunity and freedom to solve problems that are distinctively his; yet also, he so much needs strength and experience of other personalities that, without them, his own freedom or equality is largely an illusion. (p. 47)

The dual focus in the social ethic of democracy—the individual and the group—affects the second component of the social infrastructure in a democratic class: resources.

**Resources:** The earlier discussion on the role of the teacher can be helpful here. In the traditional class, as practiced by essentialists, the teacher is the source and resource; the teacher is the full mind. In contrast, resource becomes plural in the teacher-with-students-centered class: minds of both students and teacher are resources for information, knowledge, and skills as is evident in the earlier reference to Freire.

In order for the teacher and students to function as resources for each other, a structure must be developed to allow such interchange. **Structure** becomes the third component in the social infrastructure.



**Structure:** Structure is vital in a democratic class. R.L. VanSickle (1983) contends that "...democratic classrooms are highly structured classrooms" (p. 49). Rather than a closed system as in the one-way-communication system of the dictatorial class, the democratic class is based on an open structure where ideas, including divergent ideas, are encouraged and supported. Freire (1970) calls this structure "critical and liberating dialogue" (p. 52). Brameld (1977) holds the same view and calls it **consensual validation**: "a theory of experimental inquiry supplemented by much more concern for truth-seeking as an active social or dialogic...process" (p. 70). Brameld's (1964) consensual validation is a process which I propose as a "critical and liberating" dialogical structure for the democratic class:

...a process by which I express to others one or more of my own value preferences, each of which I define as a want-satisfaction, in the richest possible dialectic of cooperative, open, searching examination—a process by which I also seek their own evidence and reasons for sharing or not sharing in my preferences, and by which we then try to reach whatever agreements or disagreements that we can together, with a view to actions that will overtly dramatize our judgments and thereby help to check them. (p. 162)

The concept of consensual validation is further clarified by David R. Conrad (1976) in *Education for Transformation: Implications in Lewis Mumford's Eco-humanism*. Conrad provides ideas about how the structure for a democratic class serves the teacher and students together:

To validate the consensus on this issue, members might question the sources of evidence received, and perhaps the speed at which consensus was achieved. Was intimidation or manipulation used to sway people? If so, to what extent would it invalidate the decision? Did members communicate freely? Was the decision made because it was popular or because it was morally right? What values were accepted as good and which rejected as bad or wrong? Was the consensus consistent with the larger needs of humankind? Through empirical retesting and thorough probing the consensus could become validated, or invalidated, as the case may be. (p. 151)

It may be helpful to note that Freire and Brameld use the word **dialogue** and not **discuss**. There appears to be good reason. **Dialogue** comes from the Greek meaning "through talking" while the Latin root for **discuss** means "dash to pieces." As mentioned earlier, democracy, as defined in this article, is based on the principle that the best possible conclusions can result from being open to diverse ideas, a "talking through." The open structure in a democratic class encourages the exchange of ideas without fear of suppression by authority, which is the fourth component in the social infrastructure.

**Authority:** Before discussing the authority component, a definition of authority is necessary. When discussing issues of power and authority, I am careful to

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distinguish between the two. Although the two terms often appear to be interchanged, they are not identical. I view power as energy (electrical power; power in nature such as a tornado or a flood; human power opening a door); I view authority as **the given right to control use of energy**. This view is shared by Kenneth D. Benne (1943) in his discussion "Authority, Power, and Coercion": "...authority is present in those behavioral situations in which obedience is granted by men [and women] to other men [and women], to humanly contrived rules or to the social group of which they are a part" (p. 145). In short, authority is given and can be taken away by those who have given it. The democratic process of electing those to represent us is one example.

The question of authority is usually the first one raised in my classes and meetings on the democratic class: who's in charge? The question about who's in charge is usually the result of a concern about losing control. When first introduced to the idea of implementing a democratic class, the skepticism of some teachers is often a result of their fear that "students will take over." Students preparing for their student teaching are more often concerned about their having control than having concern about how and what students will learn.

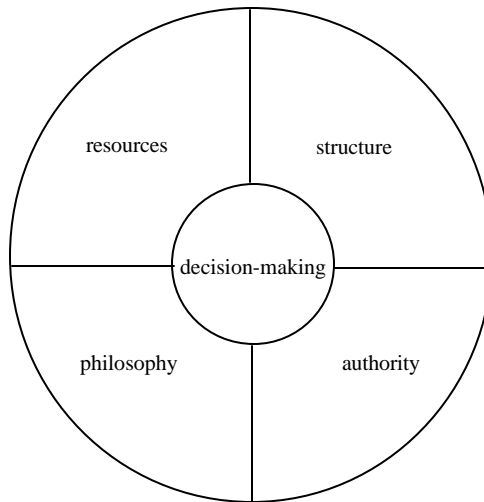
Who **is** in charge in a democratic class? Based on the philosophic, resource, and structure components above, the answer is everyone to the extent of their interest and ability. If only the teacher is in charge, we have moved to a dictatorial direction; if only the students are in charge, we have moved to a laissez-faire direction. The democratic form of social control seeks to include all in the authority component. Remembering that the social ethic of democracy requires that attention be given to both the individual and the group, all can be given authority to determine how they will use their energy (power). Again, I emphasize that this is viewing the democratic form of social control in its absolute form, an ideal toward which we are working.

Now that we have (1) a philosophic base recognizing the integrity of the individual and the group (2) where all are resources (3) within an open structure utilizing consensual validation and (4) controlled by authority which has been given to both teachers and students, a basic question emerges. What does a democratic class do? From a reconstructionist perspective, this is fundamental, for action must result from ideas.

A basis for human action is decision-making. In its very essence, that is what a social democratic class does: makes decisions. But so do classes governed under other structures. How does the democratic class differ? It differs in how and by whom the decisions are made, which takes us back to the four components described above. With the emphasis on the social factor, the participants in a democratic class make decisions **with** the involvement of everyone. Walter C. Parker and Theodore Kaltsounis contend that "... the decision-making process in democratic classrooms is, to a significant degree, decentralized" (p. 24). **In a democratic class, decision-making is group achievement** accomplished through the social infrastructure:

**Social Infrastructure Circle  
Democratic Class**

Based on *Das Geheimnis der Fünf Ringe*, Poth (1976)



Decision-making through the social infrastructure becomes the basis for how group process is carried out in a democratic class; the process can begin with planning and move through action, evaluation, and celebration. However, decision-making is not an end in itself; it must have a reason, purpose, or desired outcome. Brameld stressed the importance of ends in education. Building on an earlier Kantian aphorism, Brameld (1950) held that “Ends without means are empty, but means without ends are blind” (p. 239). In other words, there must be a relationship between our action and the intended result, and action must have direction or it is without focus. Somewhat earlier, Counts (1932) expressed a similar view when he stated, “If an educational movement, or any other movement, calls itself progressive, it must have orientation; it must possess direction” (pp. 6-7). Likewise, Dewey (1916) stressed direction: “Unless we know the end, the good, we shall have no criterion for rationally deciding what the possibilities are which should be promoted, nor how social arrangements [sic] are to be ordered” (p. 103).

Based on the above, it appears necessary to be cognizant of the reason, purpose, end, or desired outcome of decision-making in a democratic class. I propose that the outcome for social democratic classes and social democratic schools is preparing **social architects** who have dispositions, skills, and knowledge to think and to act in developing a social democratic society. The ideas and actions of the social architects lead to development of **social-self-realization** in self and others. The

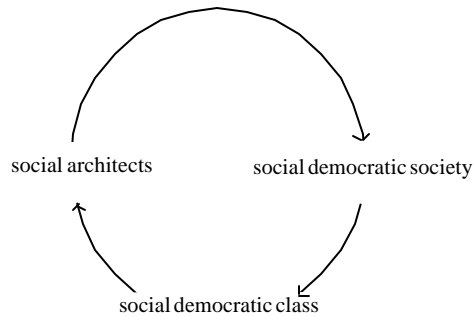
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concept of social-self-realization was developed by Brameld and an explanation of the concept may be helpful in understanding its significance and its relationship to the social infrastructure model.

Brameld's idea of social-self-realization is one idea with three components. T. M. Thomas (1987), a former student of Brameld, made a special point of this in an interview I conducted in earlier research. Thomas recalled a class session where Brameld made a specific point, emphasizing that the hyphens were used to emphasize the interrelatedness of the three separate concepts and their fusion into one. Nobuo Shimahara (1973) used a metaphor to describe social-self-realization as "our bifocal vision of culture-and-personality" (p. 10). The hyphenation may be noted; its form is parallel to Brameld's social-self-realization; there is emphasis on both the **self** and the **group** (social) in keeping with the social ethic of democracy. The reference to **realization** means there is a desired end in which the self and the group work toward achieving fulfillment. The outcome, or ideal, for the democratic class is to develop social-self-realization in students—social architects, who will serve to develop the same in themselves and others in society.

#### **Outcome Circle: Democratic Class**



#### **The Democratic Class: A Definition**

For the past several years, I've tried to develop a definition which will not become lost in theoretical language, is easily understood, and, most importantly, easily remembered. I believe that a definition for a democratic class should be like a mission statement of an organization: short and easy to remember in order for it to be practical in carrying out day-to-day actions. The following definition is offered:

As often as possible, teacher and students, together, make decisions which affect them.

The definition reflects a basic democratic principle: those who are affected by a decision should have the right to influence that decision. At the heart of the

democratic class is decision-making. Seth Kreisberg (1992), associated with Educators for Social Responsibility, holds the same view: "...students need to have a voice in decisions which affect them and a real share of the decision-making process. Taking the idea of shared decision-making seriously and applying it extensively in schools and classrooms is a major step in democratizing education" (p. 28). George Wood (1992), coordinator of the Institute for Democracy in Education, is in agreement: "The location of decision-making, about the things that really matter—curriculum, school organization, the budget, the evaluation and treatment of students—must be moved from the state house and central office to the schoolhouse and classroom" (p. 8).

The definition of the democratic class reflects the components of the social infrastructure: (1) a social ethic stressing the importance of the individual and the group, (2) an open structure, (3) teachers and students as resources, and (4) teachers with students having the authority to make decisions together.

The introductory phrase of the definition, "as often as possible," was not a part of the original definition but was added the day following my experience in an urban elementary school. The first hour of class went well. Suddenly, I saw a weighted tape dispenser coming toward my head, a pole from a school patrol flag aimed for the back of a student, and a four-foot garbage can flying through the classroom door. I thought I was in a bad movie! The experience quickly helped me to realize that democracy, as I defined it, was not and could not function in this classroom at that moment. The experience helped me to realize that we must start where the students are. If they come from authoritarian homes and classrooms, modifications may be in order.

If I work in an authoritarian school with an authoritarian principal, modifications may be in order. In such situations I find it helpful to be guided by a definition of freedom, the source of which is lost in memory: **freedom is defining my limitations**.<sup>3</sup> Once we know our limitations, we are free to act within those limitations. Even if an authoritarian principal demands certain behaviors and actions, I am free to think and act within and beyond those limitations. Ilse Aichinger's "The Bound Man" provides an image to illustrate the point as interpreted by Karl and Hamalian (1965). In spite of being bound, the Bound Man "...adapts. He makes himself a free man by working within the restrictions of his bounds" (p. 29). Likewise, if we are working in a dictatorial school or in a setting which demands traditional "law and order," we can remind ourselves of the Bound Man and adapt; we can make ourselves free by working within the restrictions of our school. The application of this view is reported in an ethnographic study by Dorothy Engan-Barker Scholtz (1991) which concludes that educators are able to manifest their beliefs in having students involved in decision-making within the expectations of a blue-collar neighborhood demanding "law, order, and discipline."

There are times, however, when the teacher and/or students may find limitations dehumanizing. The imposed limitations may be external (the community, or

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the school), or internal (in the class). Rather than merely adapting, the teacher and/or students may need to live their convictions and, as Freire (1985) states, “engage in denunciation and annunciation” (p. 55).

The concept of freedom and its relationship to the democratic class as defined above, was recently reinforced for me in a conversation with a German colleague who was a student of the school at *Schondorf am Ammersee* in southern Germany during the Third Reich. The teacher of the school, an opponent of Nazi ideas of dictatorial control and indoctrination, began a process to establish “a new order” reflecting a more democratic system which included a student board elected by students; the board had the authority to elect the principal. The freedom which this school practiced is exemplified by the fact that even though classrooms of Nazi Germany were to have pictures of Hitler, this school did not. My colleague remembers a time when a visit was to be made by Nazi officials. The teacher and students quickly displayed Hitler pictures to satisfy the expectations of the Nazi officials and continued with their learning as usual. The teacher and students of *Schondorf* recognized the limitations placed on them, met them in the eyes of those placing the limitations, and continued their use of freedom as they defined it. In sharing this experience, my colleague was quick to express a view which teachers and students may find helpful: “freedom is not given; it is taken” (Jung).

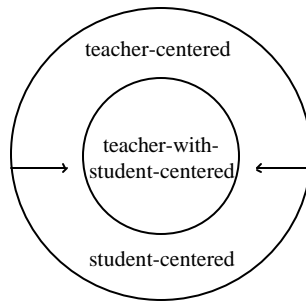
The above example can help illustrate the movement that exists in a democratic class. While the school generally practiced democratic principles, the teacher and students quickly shifted to following directions of a dictatorial system, and then returned to democratic practice. The democratic class is like a living organism. It is always developing. It is not a thing. It is an ideal toward which we strive. Boyd H. Bode (1935) captured this ideal in an article in *The Social Frontier: A Journal of Educational Criticism and Reconstruction*:

[The] teacher has fulfilled his obligations if he provides the conditions for sincere and careful thinking, **without assuming responsibility for the outcome**. (emphasis added) Faith in democracy requires submission to this test, without hedging or qualifications. If we profess to trust the intelligence of the common man, we cannot refuse to risk the application of this test...If such a faith in intelligence is not justified by the results, we can conclude that our belief in democracy was a mistake. (p. 22)

If the democratic class is an ideal, a developing “organism,” should we not view ourselves and our students similarly? We must begin where we are; and as mentioned earlier, we must begin where our students are, realizing that we are working toward the ideal of what we, individually and collectively are becoming. For some time, I tried to develop images of the teacher-centered (dictatorial), student-centered (*laissez-faire*), and teacher-with-students-centered (democratic) classes. The teacher-centered and student-centered were easy; the teacher-with-students-centered class seemed impossible. Once I remembered that the democratic

class is living, I realized why I was having trouble; trying to “set it” was the antithesis of what it is. One does not **have** a democratic class. One **is** democratic. One does democratic decision-making. With the idea of the democratic class as a developing ideal, I’ve constructed an image to support this view. It has been helpful to beginning teachers as well as experienced teachers to remind them of the movement in the democratic class, including teacher-centered, student-centered, and teacher-with-students-centered practice. The democratic class can move in and out of all three forms. But, always, there is the ideal of the students and the teacher making decisions together, which may include decisions, at times, to have the focus on the teacher or on the students.

### **Developing Democratic Class**



Adding the phrase, “as often as possible,” to the definition of the democratic class provides the reminder of reality: students may not be ready, I may not be ready. More likely, however, being ready is a matter of degree. VanSickle holds the same view:

...teachers and the classroom environment can be viewed on a continuum from more to less democratic. Rather than attempting to set up an ideal democratic classroom, it will be more useful for teachers to think about how to move from a less democratic position on the continuum to a more democratic one. Given that democracy is relative, it should be useful to clarify the endpoints of the continuum.  
(p. 52)

Therefore, we begin where we are—experimenting, which is in keeping with the nature of democracy itself. Once students and teachers begin to experiment, positive changes can begin to happen as is evident in early research findings.

### **Early Research Results**

A recent research effort was completed in which 37 teachers, including elementary and secondary teachers in urban, suburban, and rural schools, were introduced to the concept of the democratic class using the definition given above.

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It must be emphasized that this introduction was only a part of one class session in a graduate course with no specialized study of democratic methods. There was no formal expectation that teachers would implement the concept, nor did they know a questionnaire would be sent a year after they were introduced to the concept.

The teachers were asked to identify their beginning teaching as primarily dictatorial, democratic, or laissez-faire. Over 75 per cent reported that they began as dictatorial teachers. When asked if they had changed, 94 per cent reported that they were using democratic practices based on the definition in this article. The next question focused on quantity and quality of work by students, and behavior of students. Nearly 60 per cent reported that quantity of work increased when using democratic practices while over 80 per cent reported that quality of work had improved, and over 70 per cent reported that student behavior improved. Teachers indicated that varied methods were used to draw their conclusions including testing, art work, portfolios, and observations. All teachers reported that they based part of their conclusions on observation.

Teachers were given five areas to indicate when they utilized democratic practices: making rules, enforcing rules, deciding what will be taught, deciding how teaching/learning will be done, and evaluation. Over 80 per cent of the teachers utilized democratic practices in making classroom rules while 70 per cent enforced the rules through democratic practices. In the area of content of teaching/learning, democratic practices were used by over 37 per cent, while 59 per cent used democratic practices in deciding how teaching/learning would be carried out. Nearly 55 per cent utilized democratic principles in evaluation.

The final question focused on teachers' perceptions of what students and teachers were thinking/feeling about themselves when democratic practices were used. Nearly 90 per cent of the teachers reported that students appeared to think or feel better about themselves when the class used democratic practices while 83 per cent of the teachers reported the same about themselves.

From these early results, which I recognize are self-reports, the teachers have increased their use of democratic practices and report:

- ⇒ quantity of student work increased.
- ⇒ quality of student work improved.
- ⇒ student behavior problems decreased .

Democratic practices were used most often in the area of making and enforcing rules, and least often in determining what would be taught. The latter, no doubt, is a result of school-designed curriculum with teachers expected "to cover" the material.<sup>4</sup> This raises a question about who determines what is taught. How can democratic practices be increased in determining content?

It seems important to note that while many teachers did not involve students in determining **what** would be taught/learned, many more teachers saw their freedom to exercise democratic practice in **how** teaching/learning would be done, and in the



**evaluation** of student work. These teachers appear to have practiced the definition of freedom cited earlier: defining their limitations and then practicing freedom within the limitations. The “bound teachers” increased their use of freedom.

Especially noteworthy is the response of teachers concerning how they and students felt or thought about themselves when using democratic practices. The 83 per cent response in teachers thinking/feeling better about themselves provides an indication that the practice of democratic principles will continue. The increase in quantity and quality of student work would indicate the same. In a time when behavior problems (control) seem to take so much time from teaching, the reports from these teachers would indicate that more democratic practices can significantly improve how teachers and schools respond to the problem of negative student behavior. One might conclude that rules become internalized rather than remaining an external imposition.

The issue of control is a theme which deserves special attention.<sup>5</sup> Beyond the research project cited above, I have been carrying on informal research in my classroom with teacher education students. Many of my students practice democracy in their roles as coaches, tutors, parents, and workers in child-care centers. Students report that when people are given more control in their learning and living, behavior problems decrease. The age of students does not appear to be a factor. Several students who are working with three-year-olds in child-care centers are finding that behavior problems decrease when children are given choices and have some control in their experiences.

The idea of choice is basic in democracy. For those beginning to think about moving in the direction of a democratic class, making decisions about the available choices is a first step.

### Choices: Steps Toward the Democratic Ideal

The democratic class is an ideal, as is the democratic state. Reconstructionists view such ideals as utopian; however, a word of explanation is in order. The reconstructionist concept of utopia is described by Shimahara (1987) as “...what does not exist, or what is to be.” The reconstructionists’ utopia is possible. Brameld (1965) states that it is not

“...an escape from reality—to castles in the air or dreams of heaven on earth. Rather, the utopian attitude is, in Hegelian terms, a kind of a dialectical polarity to the ideological attitude. It may, indeed, function both as critique of and corrective for the obsolescences and distortions that it discovers in the ideological portrait of a given culture.”(p. 151)

Some may describe the reconstructionist view as **radical**, meaning extreme. A reconstructionist view of **radical** is given by Shimahara (1987): “By **radical** is meant going to the root, asking fundamental questions.” Reconstructionists contend that we must “go to the root”; we must practice what we say regarding

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democracy; we must question how we are educating for a democracy.

For the traditional teacher, a democratic class may appear impossible. Others, such as Mary Anne Raywid (1976), contend the democratic class is a “mistake, or misnomer” because of “incompatible, self-contradictory notions” (p. 38). Raywid and those of similar mind may consider a democratic class an oxymoron; it need not be. It may be helpful to remember that we have freedom within our limitations; we can choose to begin with a beginning we choose, working toward the ideal. There are at least seven general choices available to a teacher-with-students-class:

**1. Setting rights and responsibilities (rules, guidelines).** This is the departure from the teacher-centered class in which the teacher says, “Here are the rules for this class.” It is also a departure from the child-centered class which is based on “What would you like to do?” In the teacher-with-students-centered class, mutual influence determines the rights and responsibilities for the class. Shelley Berman (1990), former secondary teacher and a founder of Educators for Social Responsibility, begins his classes with this question: “What guidelines could we establish for ourselves that would not only make this a productive class but would also make this a safe place for people to share what they are thinking and feeling, and a safe place for people to make mistakes and learn from them?” (p. 11) The pronoun **we** indicates the teacher-with-students-centered approach.

**2. Enforcing, monitoring rights and responsibilities.** When students are given authority to determine guidelines or rules in a democratic class, it is not uncommon to find that students often enforce decisions on rights and responsibilities with little or no assistance from the teacher. One teacher in the research cited above called this “positive peer pressure.” For example, a high school teacher colleague recently had such an experience in her family living class. Students were giving reports on their food projects when a student leaned over to my colleague and burped in her face. The traditional teacher would “take charge” and the consequences might be detention or expulsion. In this class’s social infrastructure, my colleague didn’t have to do anything. The students took action by recognizing the behavior of the student as inappropriate and reprimanded their peer. Later in the year, my colleague told me about one of the best holiday gifts she received: a bag of cookies made by the burping student.

Once rights and responsibilities are established, the teacher-with-students must also monitor the process. This can be accomplished through community forums, set at regular times or called as needed. Forums provide the community of learners the opportunity to evaluate how the group is functioning, to determine whether any changes need to be made, and to recognize and to celebrate individual and group achievement.

**3. Deciding what to teach, what to learn.** This may be the most difficult choice to make since many of us are given a curriculum to implement, material “to

cover.” Again, when remembering “freedom within limitations,” teacher-with-students can discuss what is required of them by the system, achieve it, and use the remaining time for other choices. As the early research project revealed, quantity and quality of work increased when students worked in classrooms using democratic practices.

An additional point needs to be made in regard to content. From a reconstructionist perspective, merely continuing to teach what one is told may need to be challenged when the content is no longer viewed as useful, or appears dehumanizing. Teachers and students may need to “denunciate or announce” for change through a social democratic process.

**4. Deciding how to teach, how to learn.** The research of Howard Gardner (1988) in multiple intelligences can be helpful here, reminding us about the varied preferences students have in how they learn. The work of William Glasser (1969, 1984, 1986, 1992, 1993) can be helpful, too. Glasser’s emphasis on self-responsibility in learning requires that students make decisions about their learning. In a recent workshop, Brad Greene (1992), consultant for the Quality School Consortium, was asked what he suggested when teachers are told the outcomes students are expected to attain. He replied, “The teacher and students determine **how** they’re going to meet the outcomes.”

**5. Deciding how to evaluate teaching and learning.** Again, this is a departure from the teacher-centered class where the teacher, alone, evaluates student work. In a democratic class, students are actively involved in the evaluation process of their work and the teacher’s work. Glasser’s (1993) view, based on W. Edwards Deming, is that no human being should ever evaluate another human being. Glasser’s intent is to draw attention to student self-evaluation of work and behavior. For my purposes, I have redefined his reference to Deming as “no one has a right to judge another person.” I do give feedback to students, but only after they have evaluated their work. At the beginning, this is difficult for some students. Periodically, I will receive an evaluation from a student who states, “We’re doing his work; that’s what he’s hired to do!” However, over time, nearly all students approve of their involvement in the process. They begin to see the value of process and product as opposed to mere product. Along with self-evaluation, the increasing emphasis on authentic assessment appears to be a positive change in how evaluation is practiced.

**6. Discovering the why of what to teach, what to learn.** While much emphasis appears to be placed on motivation in teaching and learning, a basic method for motivation is often overlooked: discovering the why of what we are expected to learn. My students report that they rarely have been given a reason for their learning other than “you’ll need it some day” or “because I said so.”

Viktor E. Frankl in *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1962) provides a reminder about the power of the why. In his description of World War II concentration camp

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situations, Frankl reports that those who found a meaning in their existence tended to survive longer than those who had no why. Frankl refers to Nietzsche's words: "He who has a **why** to live for can bear with almost any **how**" (p. 76). Alfie Kohn (1993) relates the power of why in teaching and learning:

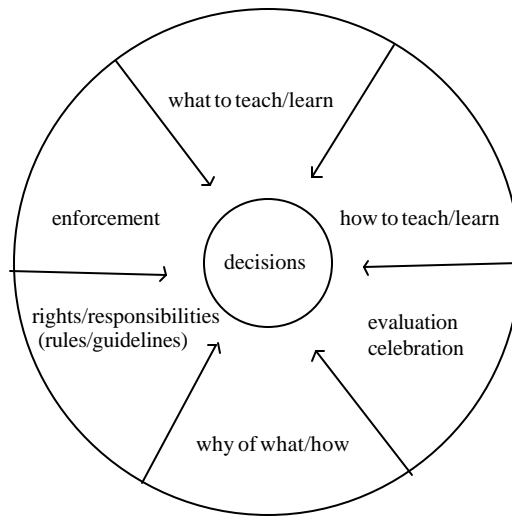
Last, and most frequently overlooked, is the need to involve students in talking about **why** they are learning. Few aspects of education are more important than the "participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process," as Dewey put it. Children should be given a voice not only about the means of learning but also the ends, the why as well as the what. Even very young children are "curriculum theorists," according to John Nicholls, and there may be no better use of classroom time than a sustained conversation following someone's challenge: "Why do we gotta do this stuff?" (p. 13)

**7. Developing democracy literacy.** Regardless which of the above choices are made, I find it necessary to use language which I refer to as "democracy literacy." We have computer literacy, work-place literacy, cultural literacy and so forth. The attention to literacy is based on the belief that one must understand the language of a subject in order to function effectively and efficiently in that subject.

Democracy literacy is a basic tool which can help students connect democratic practices in school with experiences outside of school. Because I find that many of my students are not used to transferring what they learn in the classroom to their lives outside of the classroom, democracy literacy provides a tool to make the connections. The first word on my democracy literacy list is **democracy**. An example from a community workshop can make the point. After the concept of democracy was introduced as a basis for action in the community, a participant shared her nugget during reflection: "Now I know that's what I'm doing, and no one can possibly be against it when I explain that it's democracy!" Her awareness of the concept, and equally important, her plan to use the language (democracy literacy) became a tool to help her in her community work. I propose that we—teacher and students together—begin to identify words and phrases such as **democracy**, specifically **social democracy**, which is based on **dialogue** to achieve **consensus in decision-making**, and use these words to develop democracy literacy in bringing about change in how we teach, learn, and live.

The seven choices described in the preceding paragraphs are designed to assist the teacher and students to increase democratic practice; the choices are dependent on where we are. VanSickle suggests "...a planned sequence of expanding democratic experiences will be necessary. The precise nature of the sequence will depend on a given teacher's experience, self-confidence, and skill in using group processes. It will also depend on the age, maturity, and social backgrounds of the students" (p. 63). The following visual can serve as an aid in determining direction.

**Circle of Choices  
Developing Democratic Class**



**Conclusion: Time on Relationship**

With the emphasis on educational reform, change, restructuring, improvement, and transformation, a question emerges: Can the democratic class be one means to improve the quantity and quality of student work while decreasing behavioral problems and having students and teachers think and feel better about themselves? Early research results indicate that the democratic class could be one means to achieve such ends. **What I propose is that we move from teacher education centers and schools that place a singular emphasis on “time on task” and begin to place equal, if not greater, emphasis on “time on relationship.”** I propose that relationship is basic to content and that the developing democratic class is a means to practice time on relationship.

If we are to survive as a democratic society, it seems logical to believe that our schools must prepare democratic citizens. John Dewey reminds us that “democracy has to be born anew every generation and education is the midwife” (cited by Curti, p. 499). In the democratic class, the midwife thinks and acts within the social infrastructure, to develop social architects with dispositions, skills, and knowledge to develop the social democratic society.

## Notes

1. The National Civic League is a non-profit, non-partisan educational association of individuals and organizations which seeks to promote the active involvement of citizens in the governance of their communities. Their offices are located in Denver, CO.
2. William Glasser discusses the **to-for-with** concept in *Control Theory: A New Explanation of How We Control Our Lives* (see pp. 188-189). William A. Lofquist discusses youth as objects, recipients, and resources which corresponds to the **to-for-with** framework in *New Designs for Youth Development* (see pp. 3-6). Alfie Kohn alludes to the same in *Choices for Children: Why and How to Let Students Decide*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, p. 10.
3. The definition of freedom in this article is based on "the power of effective choice." For a discussion of definitions of freedom see Vynce A. Hines, *A Summary of Democracy in Theory Into Practice*.
4. There are several curricula available which focus on the democratic process in the classroom. The following are recommended: *We've Got the Power: Skills for Democracy*, 1992, League of Women Voters of Minnesota Education Fund, 1992; *Taking Part: An Elementary Curriculum in the Participation Series*, 1991, Educators for Social Responsibility; *Making History: A Social Studies Curriculum in the Participation Series*, second printing 1987, Educators for Social Responsibility.
5. Democratic decision-making in the class is considered a basic means for social control in a school. Other means include students being involved in site-based decision-making teams, and in working directly with boards of education in policy-making as is presently being practiced in Minnesota public schools which were legislatively required to involve youth in policy-making in 1991. Future articles will be devoted to this subject.

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