

# Teaching Together: Building Deep Democracy through School-Community Partnerships

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teaching together  
to learn is to see further  
the problems-the same

### **Overview**

There is an inherent, but often unrecognized, link between schools and neighborhoods. Every school is located in some neighborhood, students often live near their school, and the neighborhood problems of segregation, violence, or health hazards often seeps over into the school setting. Additionally, though, the students in public schools have the potential to one day become the adults that live in, care for, and govern neighborhoods. Herein lays the hope for schools as a site of citizenship. Schools have the potential to be places of exploration, introspection, and action—spaces of learning that leads to lively and visible deep democracy.

Deep democracy fundamentally means learning how to live in a community and respect the people in your lives. Consequently, this process necessitates looking past the school walls to the world outside. Elements of our identity run into one another; it is nearly impossible to separate our personalities and situation at home from who we are at school or work. When a child has to avoid gangs on the way to school, he or she cannot cast aside that habit of fear at the entrance to the school, for example. The issues that plague a community generally also affect a school in that neighborhood. This paper urges students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members to develop school-community partnerships to realize and conquer their shared problems.

*The Present Problem: Schools, Communities, and Shallow Democracy*

“Schools are more **in** the community than **of** it. The schools aren’t all of **us** as a community doing our job, they are merely hired hands doing a job **for** us.”  
(Matthews 24).

In the United States we live in a democracy, but it is a representative, shallow democracy. Voter turnout, that simplest measure of democratic involvement, has decreased steadily for the last thirty years (Hudson 137). Most Americans do not participate in government or politicized civil society because they may not know how to participate, they may not been socialized to value or believe in their own ability to be an active citizen, or past participation may not have had positive results. This disenchantment is not unexpected, and perhaps is even desired by those in power. Political participation and working for systemic change within ones’ school, town, or country can become a defeating, exhausting, unsatisfying process, and so serious problems are not dealt with.

A self-perpetuating loop exists between the problems in schools and the problems in the world. Neighborhoods are usually segregated by race and class, so students attend schools segregated by race and class. Some people go to college, some go to vocational school, and some do not graduate from high school. Most people are never asked to question divisions of race or class, and so they unwittingly recreate those divisions for their whole lives, for their children, and in their children’s neighborhood and school. Then the loop begins again. Where can people insert themselves to change this system? To me, the answer to that question is with education, and in schools learning and building deep democracy by working with communities.

### *Future Opportunity*

‘Deep democracy’ means many things to many people; to me it means finding a way to live in a world that expresses my ideals. Ideas of community and working with

people are at the root of this vision; “Deep democracy is both the goal and the process that can facilitate the emergence of ‘publics’ that can exert effective transformative influence within our democratically deficient world societies” (Judith Green xiv). Deep democracy asks communities to come together and decide how to create a mutually just society; listening, deliberation, and consensus decision-making are the fundamental processes. In a deep democracy power will be distributed infinitely more equally, structural inequalities of racism, sexism, and classism will disappear, all citizens will have the capacity and opportunity to understand, analyze, and change the status quo, and people will live with “an ethic of care and responsibility” (from Moodle class forum on democracy designs).

Another set of attributes, proposed by professors Ruthanne Kurth-Schai and Chuck Green explain deep democracy as being *radically social* (based on an inclusive and genuinely collaborative process), *persistently exploratory* (a life of teaching, learning, and growing), and *compellingly aesthetic* (emotionally resonant) (Chuck Green and Kurth-Schai 76).

Deep democracy has no end; it asks individuals to continue to examine and seek to change the disconnect between dreams and reality.

What does this mean for public schools, and how does this relate to school-community partnerships? First, schools have the potential to be a learning space for the necessary tools of deep democracy. The ability to articulate ones’ viewpoint, truly listen, and come to a consensus together is not easy. Individuals must be introduced to and guided along the path to participation. If schools accept teaching students to be future citizens as their charge then schools have the obligation to create opportunities for students to practice living democratically. This process must start within the school but cannot end there. Part of deep democracy is recognizing how you fit into the world and the affects of your actions

on others near and far, and this means caring for and learning from and about the community in which you live.

### **School-community partnerships for deep democracy**

*“A democratic education should enable all people to find out and act on who they are, what their passions, gifts, and talents may be, what they care about, and how they want to make a contribution to each other and the world.”*

*(Darling-Hammond in The Public Purposes of Education and Schooling 45)*

#### *Shared ownership*

The goals of deep democracy (equal access to resources and opportunity, acting on one’s vision, critical thought leading to action) cannot be achieved without deeply democratic pedagogies. Schools offer an incredible chance for students and community members to work together in deeply democratic ways to create a school that they believe in. This process has many different components:

Making the school accessible—There will always be parents and community members that cannot or simply do not want to be involved in their local school, but for those that are interested it is important to make schools as open as possible. Establishing carpools to school or cooperative childcare during parent-teacher conferences or other large school events are simple ways to increase access to the school. Additionally, teachers and staff need the competency to work with their particular community. Offering diversity trainings and support for teachers to learn about working in a multicultural environment is one step towards making the school a more welcoming place.

Communication—Many schools send monthly or quarterly newsletters to parents and the local newspaper to keep the community informed of the goings-on at school. These publications provide an excellent way to learn what has already occurred but often are less useful to predict and become involved in future changes. Keeping the community aware of

possible up-coming projects, plans, or administrative moves is necessary to give community members a chance to become involved before a change occurs, and to share their concerns and ideas during a planning process rather than being surprised after the fact. To be truly deeply democratic these publications must also allow for dialogue and dissent. School newsletters should include letters, articles, and other media submitted by students, teachers, community members, or other people with an interest in the school, even if they disagree with the school leaders.

Administrative structures—School board or school councils are an excellent start to community members sharing ownership of a school, but they do not engender a deeply democratic situation. School board members cannot represent the community if they do not know what the community thinks. A series of community forums for adults, parents, teachers, and students to talk together about their visions for the school need to be created. The community will not have one unified vision, of course, but it is important to share all of their thoughts and hear other people's perspective and ideas. It is impossible (and probably also undesirable) for the school to implement every suggestion. But if the same problems are identified repeatedly this should be a signal to the school and administration. Bringing different constituent groups together early on allows them to work together, learn from one another, and hopefully create a product or situation that pleases everyone.

#### *The school as a multi-use space*

First and foremost, the school is a space for students to learn. But, if the goal is to live deeply democratically and be a community gathering point, then the school must be open and comfortable to more than just students. The physical place of the school can be utilized in many different ways by members of the community. During non-school hours the

building can be opened to adult literacy courses, English Language-Learner classes, use of library and computer resources, or use of the gym for recreational sports teams. People may not feel strong ties to a **community**, but sharing the space in this way creates a physical reminder that students and the people outside of the school are at least part of the same **neighborhood**. Relationships cannot be forced. Simply sharing space, though, is a start to breaking down divisions between work and home, public and private, and learning and living. Hopefully schools give students the skills and the desire to always continue learning, and to realize that learning and teaching can happen in many different ways.

*Learning from the local*

Finally, the greatest opportunity for schools and communities to link together to build deep democracy is through a locally-rooted, action-based curriculum. With the exception of the occasional field trip schools rarely teach from or about the neighborhood in which they are based. This creates a sense that school is about theory and distant ideas, when in fact much of what you learn in history, geography, math, government, or science courses can be seen directly in your world. Students need to know about situations far beyond their local lives, but their learning becomes more real when explicit and concrete connections are made to their own lives and situations. Many components must come together to allow for these deeply democratic linkages that build life-long learners and citizens:

Supporting teachers and working in collaboration—Busing and teachers from outside the neighborhood often lead to a classroom that knows little about the community in which a school is located. Hopefully schools can support teachers learning about their area, but in a system of school-community partnerships, though, the whole burden does not need to be on teachers. Who better to teach about the neighborhood than the people that

live there? Schools and teachers should seek out and welcome political, non-profit, religious, and other civic leaders into the classroom to share their experiences and perspectives. This could mean a school board member speaking to a government class about voting and electoral systems, the leader of an immigrant-rights group talking about different ethnic groups in the neighborhood, or a yoga teacher coming to a physical education class to teach alternative forms of exercise and health. Or, simply talking about what it is like to have a full-time job or go to college may offer a new perspective.

Valuing many ways of learning—Clearly, education does not take place only in the classroom. Deep democracy recognizes the need for learning and social justice work to take place everywhere, all the time. So, schools need to acknowledge and support the interests and work done by their students, staff, and faculty outside the school day. One opportunity is creating student organizations based around issues like environmentalism, peace, feminism, etc. This gives students a chance to take theory or history they learn in school and **practice living** an environmentally conscious, peaceful, feminist life. Students need time to study and reflect on what they learn, but they also need a chance to act on the beliefs that they create.

Schools should help students and student groups work on these issues in their community and school. After all, “Serving others is not just a form of do-goodism or feel-goodism; it is a road to social responsibility and citizenship...in serving community, the young forge commonality; in acknowledging difference they bridge division; in assuming individual responsibility, they nurture social citizenship” (Barber 30). This may mean creating a community garden, becoming involved in a political campaign, or door-knocking to talk with community members about their concerns. In taking their education outside of

the classroom students learn how to take ownership of and responsibility for their community and broaden their conception of education.

Action-based curriculum—In addition to supporting extracurricular work in the community, the school and the community need to come together in the classroom. As a class, students should take on projects to work for the betterment of their school or local community. This requires first identifying problems and concerns in their neighborhood; to do this, students or the school must reach out to community members and find out what issues have touched their area. I recommend that schools hire a community liaison or community organizer to begin building the connections to the neighborhood.

Once areas of concern and necessary work have been identified, teachers and students can find ways to incorporate these ideas into their classes. If community members mention environmental concerns, for example, a biology class and woodshop class can work together on a community composting project. The biology students can learn about plant matter and environmental cycles, the shop class can build the compost containers, and together they can create a brochure for the community about how to properly compost and the importance of food sustainability and reducing waste. Or, if dissatisfaction with the physical landscape is a local problem then an art class can design and paint murals for buildings throughout the neighborhood. Where confusion or discomfort with changing demographics of the neighborhood is a problem then history classes can learn about the immigrant groups in their neighborhood through ethnographic interviewing and create a public history display for a visible civic building. These are very simple suggestions, but they rarely happen in schools. Schools and communities have so many and such different resources; the act of sharing them greatly enriches both sectors.

**Likely Barriers**

The policy recommendations previously proposed are wonderful and beautiful, but the time and cost involved in making them happen presents a seemingly insurmountable barrier to many schools. Asking schools to sit down and listen to their communities and then re-shaping your curriculum to match those needs when teachers are already bogged down with overcrowded classrooms and teaching to standardized tests is almost offensive. Further, many people would argue that asking schools to tackle local problems means that they will take an unacceptably political stance. These are very real problems, but the need for deep democracy is so great. We simply must work together to find ways around the challenges of time, money, and the fear of politicized schools.

**Conclusion**

I spoke earlier about the self-perpetuating loop between the problems in neighborhoods and the problems in schools. The only way that I see to break this cycle is through linking schools and their neighborhoods and working together to address their shared issues. When students learn about deep democracy and living as a community they acquire the philosophy and practice to change future worlds. Maybe these students will become the adults that change the reality of under-funded, under-staffed schools!

There will be a great initial expense as schools and community groups and individuals try to find one another and implement projects. Hopefully, though, working together will save money over time if the community groups can share space, resources, and some funding with schools. There is also that very distant potential that these relationships could have such a positive affect on the community that they ultimately save

money on service provision elsewhere—on jails, food banks, and welfare-to work programs, for example.

Shying away from politics will not make problems or power differentials disappear. But by acknowledging and embracing the issues in our lives perhaps we can begin the steps to challenging these problems. Schools must be places that really examine what is going on in the world, that allow students to challenge the status quo, and that believe in the potential of their communities, and this can be best achieved through strong and intentional connections between schools and their communities.

## Annotated Bibliography

Barber, Benjamin R. "Public Schooling: Education for Democracy." The Public Purpose of Education and Schooling. Goodlad, John I. and Timothy J. McMannon, ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

Dewey, John. Democracy and Education. New York: The Free Press, 1916.

The classic; every other book that I read on this topic referenced this work by John Dewey. He is a political theorist from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and presents a clear argument about the necessity of education, the democratic potential of schools, and the importance of constructivist education. Dewey utilizes philosophy as well as more accessible, practical examples in a readable book.

Fischman, Gustavo E. and Peter McLaren. "Expanding Democratic Choices: Schooling for Democracy, Towards a Critical Utopianism." Contemporary Sociology. Vol 29 No 1 (January 2000): pp 168-179.

The utopian potential of democratic schools is the root of this article. The authors bring in Foucault, Bloch, Freire and other advanced theorists, but do so in an understandable way. It is important to me to sometimes just read an article that believes in the possibilities for change, and this work fulfills that need. The example of Citizen Schools in Porto Alegre, Brazil, offers a concrete model for a utopian educational system.

Green, Judith M. Deep Democracy: Community, Diversity, and Transformation. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999.

This book formed the basis of my understanding of deep democracy. Judith Green reflects on John Dewey, Alain Locke, Martin Luther King, Cornel West, and ideas of capitalism and the public square to create a strong, comprehensive vision for moving towards a more deeply democratic society. This book is especially useful when read in its entirety but chapters can also stand alone, if you are only interested in one theorist or topic.

Gutmann, Amy. Democratic Education. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987.

Hatcher, Richard. "Another School is Possible." Red Pepper Magazine. 20 November 2005. <<http://www.redpepper.org.uk/cularch/x-another-school.html>>

This article describes a true school-community partnership established in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The community elects school administrators, teachers have paid sabbaticals to learn about neighborhood issues, students are not tracked, and multiple styles of learning are used. The article traces the development of these schools and other participatory programs in Brazil as they emerged from the Workers' Party and the World Social Forum. It is inspirational to see that a model for schools and communities working together can really succeed.

Hudson, William E. *American Democracy in Peril: Eight Challenges to America's Future*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2004.

In this book Hudson challenges many people's assumptions about American democracy. His chapters on separation of powers, the Supreme Court, individualism, citizen participation, elections, corporate power, inequality, and national security ask whether these qualities and institutions foster or inhibit American democracy. The book does not speak directly about education, but it is easy to see how the subject of each chapter carries from society into schools.

Kurth-Schai, Ruthanne and Charles R. Green. Re-envisioning Education and Democracy pp. 74-77. Unpublished manuscript, 2005.

Mathews, David. Is There A Public for Public Schools? Dayton: Kettering Foundation Press, 1996.

A short read presenting a study by the Kettering Foundation on connections between public life and schools. The results of the study are rather disheartening, but what I enjoyed most was the great amount of space that Mathews gave to suggestions and directions for society and schools.

Parker, Walter C. Teaching Democracy: Unity and Diversity in Public Life. New York: Teachers College Press, 2003.

This book was a text for the Re-Envisioning Education and Democracy course. I found Parker's arguments for citizenship education, multiculturalism in the classroom, and the relationship between democracy in schools and societies to be a really good base for the course, my paper, and my own understandings of education.

Re-Envisioning Education and Democracy class. "Democracy Designs Forum." Online posting. 1 November 2005. Re-Envisioning Education and Democracy Moodle Forum. Accessed 10 December 2005.  
<<http://moodle.macalester.edu/mod/forum/view.php?id=2857>>

"Rethinking Schools Online." 20 November 2005.

[http://www.rethinkingschools.org/special\\_reports/bushplan/index.shtml](http://www.rethinkingschools.org/special_reports/bushplan/index.shtml)

This is my favorite on-line education resource. Rethinking Schools is a journal that you can order, but they also archive all of the articles on the web for free. It has a more progressive leaning, and provides a great deal of information about civic engagement, race and ethnicity in schools, No Child Left Behind, and other timely topics.

Sehr, David T. Education for Public Democracy. New York: State University of New York Press, 1997.

Smith, Mark K. "Education for Democracy." The Encyclopedia of Informal Education. 2001. Infed Encyclopedia. 2 December 2005. <<http://www.infed.org/biblio/b-dem.htm>>

Wilson, Patricia A. "Deep Democracy: The Inner Practice of Civic Engagement." Fieldnotes: A Newsletter of the Shambala Institute. 10 December 2005. <[http://www.shambhalainstitute.org/Fieldnotes/Issue3/Deep\\_Democracy.pdf](http://www.shambhalainstitute.org/Fieldnotes/Issue3/Deep_Democracy.pdf)>