

EDUCATIONAL DEMOCRACY SUPPORTING STUDENT SUCCESS

**THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL DEMOCRACY IN SUPPORTING STUDENT
SUCCESS**

by

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Here is to the next chapter!

Abstract

The purpose of this capstone study is to understand the potential of educational democracy. Allowing students to become active participants in the learning process through student voice, student choice, global citizenship, and other methods of integrating democratic ideals has the potential to engage and empower students in the schooling process. This can also help with future success because students will have used their school years to practice democratic ideals, fail in supportive settings, and understand their roles as active citizens. Democratic education can also be used to combat many current societal issues that are found in the school setting, such as racism. However, school leaders need to ensure best practices because democracy is flawed. Careful thought, considerations and reflections need to take place to ensure a positive impact is being made through democratic education. This capstone study provides a review of the literature related to educational democracy; democratic ideals, including eliminating racism through democratic ideals; and leadership. Following the literature review, recommendations are made for school leaders on how to begin to implement more democratic learning in their schools. Democracy is constantly changing, and leaders, staff and students who are on the journey of educational democracy will also be forever changing and adapting to fit the needs of the school community.

Key words: Educational democracy, School leadership, Global citizenship, Service learning, Student voice, Student choice

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The role of educational democracy in supporting student success

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

“School is, or at least should be, the perfect experiment in democracy” (Hunt & Hunt, 2005, p. 103). Alberta educators must teach students about the role of democracy in Canada and about the role of citizens in democracy. The curriculum followed in Alberta states that students should learn to think critically and have choice in what they are learning (Alberta Education, 2007). However, when one reflects on the Alberta educational system, one asks, how democratic are the classrooms, schools, and school authorities in the province?

According to the United Nations (2018), there are 10 essential elements of democracy, including the respect for human rights, freedom of expression and opinion, transparency and accountability, free and independent media, and the holding of fair elections (United Nations, 2018, para. 8). According to Elections Canada (2021), Canadian youth aged 18 to 24 were less likely to have confidence in and satisfaction with Canada’s elections. Elections Canada also noted that even though most of the youth were participation in elections, most indicated they would like to see (Elections Canada, 2021). Evolution in democratic ideals is necessary for democracy to grow alongside our changing society, and youth must be at the forefront of these changes. It will be their responsibility to ensure that progress continues in democracy and education, and it will be the responsibility of educators to ensure that students have opportunities to experiment, learn, and question democratic principles.

Background

On January 6, 2021, thousands of angry Americans stormed the Capitol building in Washington, DC, believing the recent presidential election had been stolen (Barry et al., 2021).

Directed by President Donald Trump, many of the rioters felt that their democratic country was riddled with inequalities, failing to represent their needs, and suffering from state-sponsored censorship (Zou & Logan, 2022). Over 140 police officers were injured during this event, and an estimated 1.5 to 30 million dollars in damages was sustained. Members of the Senate and House of Representatives were evacuated or told to hide under their desks and had to don gas masks in case they needed to be used (Barry et al., 2021; Zou & Logan, 2022). How had the nation built upon the words of Thomas Jefferson in 1776 that “all men are created equal (...) with unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” turned into a country with an extremely difficult relationship with democracy? This event only caused more mass polarization, extreme individualism and anger throughout the United States than were already present. During this historical event, I reflected often on how it might impact the youth watching and what they would learn from the actions. These students were getting lessons in how to behave and act as democratic citizens from other citizens who were expressing their distrust in their government.

Several years ago, the school I was working at had an issue with students' behaviour during lunch time. Traditionally, students ate their lunch in the gym, but the noise level in the gym and the lack of clean-up became unmanageable. At a staff meeting, we decided the best way to solve this issue was to have each class of students sit in a designated circle in the gym according to a seating plan made by each class's teacher. This would help control the noise level in the gym and would help with the garbage problem as we would always know where each student was sitting. The students were very upset about this proposal. From their perspective, it would cause them to lose the only free time of their day. Lunch time would become just another time where they were controlled by the teachers. A class of Grade 6 students, who were learning

about democracy, got together and told the principal they wanted to have a vote on the new rules; they felt that as citizens of a democratic country, they had a right to vote on the matter. When the principal said no, they created a petition and went around to other grades to obtain signatures. I was impressed with the students. They converted their learning into real action and brought their concerns directly to the principal. These students, in my opinion, were pursuing a commendable use of democracy in action. I was proud of the students for using their voice and stating their opinion, and I assumed the process would be settled with a consensus or agreement between the students and the principal. However, the principal responded by saying to the students, “School is not a democracy, it is a dictatorship.”

There are many reasons why schools choose to make executive decisions instead of creating more democratic opportunities. This might be because of a lack of knowledge needed by a student to make the right decisions, the extra time it would take to include students in decision making and, possibly, fear or a lack of trust on the part of educators. However, school is supposed to be the place where students can grow, learn, take risks, and try democratic practices before they are required to actively participate in our country’s democracy. It is our role as educators to give students the opportunity to try. We should be operating our schools with democratic involvement from the students, such as using the student voice and critical thinking, to help prepare our students to be active citizens.

What is demonstrated through these two examples is the fact that democracies are facing many challenges throughout the world, including a lack of faith in democratic principles on the part of many people. In both examples, democratic ideals were superseded by authoritarian practices, and our youth were then forced to reconcile their principles with the unexpected actions of adults. I believe by prioritizing standards of democracy at the school level students

will learn about important elements of democracy and start to discover what changes need to be made for all individuals to feel as though they benefit from and can trust democracy. I worry that by choosing to operate schools and classrooms in a dictatorial style, students will not have the opportunity to grow in ways that reflect democracy and may come to resent the institutions we need to move us forward.

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (2009) states “Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.” (p. 3). The opinions of the Grade 6 students who wanted to vote on the new lunch rules were not given due weight in accordance with their age. One scholar believes “children’s voices are not sought out” (Grant, 2016, p. 36) and other scholars believe modern schooling sounds exceptionally like “the tyrannical classrooms of Great Britain ” (Ayers et al., 2010, p. 2). Ayers et al. (2010) wondered why descriptions of schools by Charles’ Dickens in 1854 sound familiar today. He said “(m)onarchies, after all, demand fealty first and foremost, whereas democracies, at least theoretically, are built on the active engagement and participation of a free and enlightened people” (p. 2). Are schools prioritizing rule-following, well-behaved students over engaged, free and expressive students?

Statement of the Issue

The lack of student voice could be addressed if schools were to participate in school democracy. Our educational systems should be working for students to teach them in the best way possible, to teach them what they believe is useful for their futures, and to prepare them for their own futures. However, schools rarely ask students or utilize the student voice to determine

what each student needs from their educational system. Schools could give students choice in various places, whether through a student-led school council, more decisions within the classroom regarding assignment content and choice, or in larger school-wide venues where they could make decisions with the support of leaders. As Cook-Sather (2014) stated, “student voice in its most profound and radical form, calls for a cultural shift that opens up spaces and minds not only to the sound but also to the presence and power of students” (p. 363). There are many options for including students more in decision making. Schools should be empowering students to take on more ownership of their learning and give them the ability to communicate what is or is not working for their learning.

Although prioritizing student voice and choice would be an important aspect of creating more democratic schools, there are many other ways schools should focus on democracy. As Carr et al. (2014) stated,

Democracy is a valuable educational end because it is widely recognized that it is not only a means to better decision making but also a way of living with others, a way to share our lives with others and to respect those others as fellow human beings. In this vein, democracy is a culture and has to do with an encounter between persons. (p. 201)

The power of democracy lives in the voices of all citizens. Jefferson’s famous contribution to the United States Declaration of Independence in 1776, the phrase “all men are created equal,” had its roots in inequality. In Jefferson’s day, “men” referred only to white men who owned property, and for Jefferson, the opinions of white men who owned property were the only ones of value. A racist underpinning to the democratic American nation was present on day one. Here in Canada, our history of excluding populations based on race is also grim. The treatment of Indigenous groups across Canada is of great concern. This is especially true when one considers the

important democratic ideals of respect for human rights. In reflecting on the importance of valuing the opinions of others, learning about the world, and listening to the voices of those underrepresented by the government, this capstone study, written in Canada, would not hold merit if it did not begin to look at democratic schools through the lenses of Indigenous peoples and racism in our society. Unfortunately, due to Canada's history, the voices of our Indigenous students will need to be fostered to become loud and confident voices. Teaching Indigenous students, and all minority students, the value of their own opinions and how to use the power of their opinions in a democracy will allow them to become strong advocates for their communities. This adds an essential layer to the importance of democratic schools.

Overall, there are many facets of democracy, and many responsibilities must be shouldered by citizens for democracy to be taken seriously and for it to play a strong, active role in citizens' lives. Democracy cannot exist without people, and it asks a lot of people. Democratic skills need to be developed at the school level, not only to benefit our government practices but because these skills are the pillars of a society that runs smoothly, solves problems, and focused on building a sustainable future. By focusing on underdeveloped areas of our educational system, we can help our future generations to receive the tools they need to overcome the difficulties they will face as citizens of their community, country, and the wider world.

Purpose of the Study

The intent for this capstone study is to explore the role of democracy in schools, to determine how schools can use democracy to engage students and to explore the roots of the practice and the role of citizens in democracy. As Carr et al. (2014) explained, "Democracy, like education, is political, laden with values, biases, judgements, predispositions, and ideological tendencies, and is based, to varying degrees, on lived experience" (p. 25). With the connection

between educational systems and democracy, how can we use democracy in our schools to teach students about the complexities of our society? In this capstone study, the issues such as student success, student engagement, students' empowerment, racism, and the role of school leaders are addressed.

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative capstone study is to explore the role of democracy in junior high and high schools in a Canadian province.

1. How can practicing democracy in classrooms engage and empower students?
2. How can practicing democracy in classrooms help eliminate racism in school communities?
3. What is the role of school leaders in ensuring democratic practices in schools?

Significance of the Study

It is the role of education to prepare students for their futures. In a democratic country, this means preparing students to be active citizens and democratic participants. As Kahne and Westheimer (2003) stated, "Is it important to learn math, history, English, and science? Yes. Is this focus enough to sustain a democratic society? No" (p. 63). Teaching students to think critically, form opinions, make choices, and participate in discussions about the world and society is important at the classroom and school-wide levels to prepare students for their futures. This can be done in many meaningful ways that will also serve to engage students in their learning experience. The Alberta *Leadership Quality Standard* contains multiple key themes present in democratic schools, such as fostering effective relationships, leading a learning community, and understanding and responding to a larger social context (Alberta Education, 2020). By utilizing democratic practices in schools, issues such as individuals' rights,

polarization, media biases, globalization, and the lasting effects of COVID-19 can be examined (Eichengreen, 2020). Students are entering a world full of unknowns, and the educational system in truly democratic schools can better support and education them for this new world.

Scope of the Study

Research about democracy will clarify how the process of democracy can help engage students in education and identify how young people can be empowered to become active democratic citizens. The limitations of historical democracy will also be researched to learn about the racial underpinnings of democratic societies and extrapolate ways in which schools can use democracy positively to benefit all students. The role of school leaders in the democratic process will be a specific focus of the research and will serve as the basis for determining how these leaders can better support the process in their schools.

Summary

The 15th century proverb “children should be seen and not heard” seems to be prevalent in education today. Providing students with the knowledge and skills to express their own opinions can lead to significant school growth that will support students directly. In addition, focusing on democracy will lead to more emphasis on 21st century skills, which our students need to become strong individuals and global citizens. The skills presented through democratic learning are “often viewed as the core of small-d democracy, [and they] create a foundation upon which more substantial work towards a more equitable and just society can be advanced” (Kahne et al., 2021, p. 2). Using democratic practices in education can help provide both a more sustainable future for students and help redirect education to focus specifically on benefiting students instead of making them vessels for political ideologues.

Outline of the Remainder of the Paper

Chapter 2 reviews the literature on democracy in schools and determines what the literature says about focusing on strong democratic elements during the school process, the gaps present in democratic school practices and the role of school leaders in affirming the former and filling the latter. Chapter 3 provides a summary of the findings from the literature review. Recommendations focus on how school leaders can ensure democratic practices in schools are being followed within schools. Recommendations are followed by the conclusions of this capstone study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

As Dewey (1916) noted,

The devotion of democracy to education is a familiar notion. Democracy is defined as a government resting upon popular suffrage that cannot be successful unless those who elect and who obey their governors are educated. Since a democratic society repudiates the principle of external authority, it must find a substitute in voluntary disposition and interest; these can be created only by education. (p. 66)

The connection between education and democracy is undeniable as both strive to work for the masses, are continuously shifting and work together to create active citizens of a nation.

However, democratic ideals are never guaranteed, and educators need to know how to use educational democracy to engage students, empower students and eliminate racism in the classroom.

Definitions of Terms

Deliberative democracy: a reason-based public discussion that focuses on reaching a consensus. “[A]n education for deliberative democracy is first and foremost interested in teaching future citizens how to state arguments, underpin them with reasons, and listen to and reflect upon what others are saying, while striving to reach a collective conclusion with the other participants” (Samuelsson, 2018, p. 8)

Democratic colonialism: the use of democratic ideals can be used to “perpetuate racism and cause exclusion of racial minorities” (Wotherspoon, 2014, p. 328) through legislation, discourse, and institutionalized opportunities.

Democratic education: is an educational system that allows students to participate in the schooling process by managing their own learning, and/or by participating in the governance of their school.

Democratic ideals: the core beliefs behind the democratic principles that need to be used in the school environment to promote school democracy. Democratic ideals relate to practices and principles that should be found in all democracies and can be utilized in the school environment, such as

- Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms
- Freedom of expression and opinion
- Using voice to support or oppose democratic notions
- Collaboration
- Universal suffrage
- Transparency and accountability in public administration
- Free, independent, and pluralistic media
- Separation of powers
- Community engagement
- Understanding of local, political, and national issues discussed in the political landscape

(United Nations, 2018, para. 8)

Educational democracy: as educational system based on democratic ideals that prepares students for democratic citizenship by teaching those ideals and allowing, and encouraging, students to practice those ideals during their school years.

Global citizenship: the social, political, environmental, and economic actions of globally minded individuals and communities on a worldwide scale.

Multiculturalism: “Multiculturalism is defined as the ability of different societies with different cultures to live together with equal opportunities within the boundaries of a nation state.” (Doğru & Demirbas, 2021, p. 25)

School leader(s): the principal, vice-principal(s) and other school staff member in a school leadership role who implement school leadership practices.

Service learning: Service learning is a pedagogical strategy whereby schools merge academics with community service; the philosophy is that students learn best from experience (Dewey, 1916, p. 123), and according to Dewey, service learning can create experiences for students.

Student choice: allowing students to make decisions at the classroom level that would previously have been made by school staff; students can offer multiple opinions of assessments, learning, reading, participation, or various formats for learning.

Student voice: promoting the expression of values, opinions, beliefs, and perspectives of a student in the school context; student voice is “the inclusion, influence and active participation of young people in decisions about matters affecting them at school” (Mayes et al., 2019, p. 158).

Review of Research Literature

Education and Democracy

The connection between education and democracy has always been present, and the two entities are interdependent as education is necessary to democracy’s success (Carpenter, 2013, p. 266).

Jefferson (1818) wrote that for education to help support democracy, it needed to

- Give everyone the information required for their business
- Allow individuals to communicate their ideas

- Teach the duties owed to neighbours and country
- Define the rights of people and the actions required to live with order and justice
- Teach the skill of observing with intelligence all social relations.

(Peterson, 1984, p. 459).

Almost 100 years later, American philosopher and “father of democratic education” John Dewey defended these ideals. Dewey (1916) believed “the aim of education is to enable individuals to continue their education or that the object and reward of learning is continued capacity for growth” (p. 107). Dewey (1939) stressed the importance of teaching students democratic ideals that were “maintained on as many fronts as culture has aspects: political, economic, international, educational, scientific and artistic” (p. 173). Dewey (1916) believed the educational system should prioritize democracy so students would be ready to face citizenship and uphold their diligence as active participants in their government, and he also believed democracy could not flourish if the curriculum had a narrow field of view and was only made for the few attending higher education (p. 100).

Jefferson and Dewey agreed that without educated citizens, a democracy would only represent “the tyranny of opinion over wisdom” (Carpenter, 2013, p. 9). Why should the educational systems be controlled by an inevitably flawed system of government? “A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living” (Dewey, 1916, p. 87). Schools should be a microcosm of society, allowing students to engage in dialogue and critical thinking, and develop social and emotional skills (Monzo & Morales, 2016, p. 2).

This foundation of educational democracy presented by Dewey is the basis of democratic education to this day, and his academic work is cited regularly. Dewey’s beliefs provide the beginning of a theoretical basis for choosing to implement democratic ideals in the classroom

and explore their potential. In reflecting on the essential elements of democracy, one can see there are many opportunities to use democracy in the schools to promote student learning and the valuing of opinions, efforts that correspond with Jefferson's and Dewey's educational beliefs. Learning to respect and value the opinions of others is a crucial skill that would help mend many misunderstandings and conflicts in our world today. The current polarization across political groups makes it hard for democracy to function properly. By focusing on the valuable opinions of others, as is described in the fundamentals of democracy, schools can expose students to a variety of thoughts and discussions or debates on the many complex problems we are dealing with in our society.

Engaging and Empowering Students

In democratic classrooms, there is space for students to explore, make mistakes and use their own agency to defend opinions and ideas, instead of having to follow what teachers tell them to do (Collins et al., 2019, p. 5). This allows students to explore and engage with the curricular content to make their learning more meaningful. Democratic education creates opportunities for students inside the classroom that will help grow them into active citizens in their democratic country. However, it is important to examine whether prioritizing democratic ideals in the classroom will engage students with their learning and empower them for the future.

Engaging and Empowering Students Through Global Citizenship

Various studies demonstrate an overlap between global citizenship and school democracy; this is because many democratic ideals are needed to promote global citizenship at the school level (DiCicco, 2016; Holden, 2000; Huckle, 2015). Schools based on democratic ideals are needed to promote education for citizenship on all levels, from local to global. The

Global Citizens' Initiative outlines eight responsibilities global citizens have, many of which overlap with democratic ideals, such as understanding one's own perspective and the perspective of others, respecting cultural diversity, and making connections and building relationships with people (Israel, 2015). By laying the groundwork for global citizenship, schools can promote democratic learning. Globalization is a prominent force in our world, and many of the issues discussed in learning about global citizenship apply to the smaller communities, as well. As Cheng and Yang (2019) noted, "[g]lobalization, with its obvious benefits and profound impacts on people's lives, has caused great concerns around inequality and social justice" (p. 554). Some of the issues affect local communities as well as countries around the world, such as environmental changes, poverty, trade relations, health issues, and human rights.

The effects of globalization and our power of access to the world we have can also be supported through more democratic learning. Prioritizing learning about the world, other forms of government, and current events can help build a base for students to become lifelong learners and active citizens in their democratic practices. Knowledge about different cultures can help expose students to difficult problems, such as immigration, the status of refugees, and the migrations of peoples across the globe. Engineers, scientists, historians, humanists, and futurists all attempt to make connections across the globe to try and solve some of the world's most pressing problems (Fox & Hundley, 2011). It is no longer enough for students to learn about the history of their own country because the impacts of other countries and cultures on our everyday lives are undeniable. Not only do citizens need to know about other countries and other perspectives and decipher many opinions, but now, they must know how to make sense of the overwhelming amount of fake news, biased media and social media algorithms that hide or distort different perspectives, making it extremely difficult to navigate all the information in the

world. Teaching students to become good researchers and investigators, as well as to respect the importance of independent media, is another fundamental pillar needed for our democratic society. Holden (2000) noted,

Education for citizenship provides the potential for all that was good in world studies to reemerge, with an added emphasis on political education. It could lead to a radical new area in the curriculum, equipping children with the skills and knowledge to participate responsibly as adults in the next century. (p. 80)

By focusing on global issues and trying to work through the details of global problems or resolutions for solving them, students can redefine the curriculum and demonstrate in new ways how a curriculum can be meaningful.

DiCicco (2016) studied a Pennsylvania high school that prioritized global studies by adding a new class to its high school curriculum. Students discussed international immigration, the condition of women in different areas of the world, education around the world and peace, as well as changed reading guidelines to include more foreign authors so they could learn about different parts of the world. DiCicco found that students became engaged in the course; it increased the level of competitiveness in the school and caused students to focus on world issues. “[I]t has also helped students broaden their perspectives by exposing them to points of view other than that of their teacher or their textbook” (DiCicco, 2016, p. 15). Studying global citizenship in the classroom supports many democratic ideals, such as engaging in the freedom of expression and opinion, collaborating with others, and respecting human rights.

Interdisciplinary Studies as a Tool to Engage and Empower Students.

Focusing on democratic ideals not only supports student learning about our complex world using 21st century skills, but it also creates opportunities for interdisciplinary studies in

the classroom. By allowing students more control of their classroom environment through democratic learning, students are empowered to focus in a unique way on a particular topic that allows them to make connections among different subjects. Holding space for students' interests allows them to make meaningful connections to the material, and if students collaborate on their learning, they have an opportunity to share connections with classmates. This process was demonstrated by Cruz et al. (2015) in their article titled, “‘I Have Never Witnessed Students So Engaged’: The Art of Democracy in Schools,” which discussed students’ interactions with Ramon Esono Ebale, an artist from Equatorial Guinea. Before meeting him, students spent time learning about Equatorial Guinea’s history, geography, economy, and political system. The learning process promoted collaboration and allowed students to research and investigate civic ideals in “a classroom where multiple perspectives are valued and expressed; decision making is shared; creative and critical thought is encouraged; and discussions on social transformation, injustice and the common good are encouraged” (Cruz et al., 2015, p. 11). This process engaged and motivated the students who were then able to learn directly from Ebale, ask questions, engage in discussions, and connect art with a political landscape.

Winter (2008) discussed the importance of using newspaper articles and journalistic writing in the classroom to encourage student civic participation. Because many students are not reading or listening to the news, creating more opportunities for them to interact with the news allows them to make meaningful connections about politics, current events, and issues that may be affecting their lives. “If students do not read, discuss or engage in the issues through watching or reading the news, a growing number of younger adult citizens will be less knowledgeable about their government and public policy knowledge of which is important to being a good and responsible citizen” (Winter, 2008, p. 34). Winter argued that allowing students to meet with

writing professionals, focus on the news daily in all subjects and discuss what is in the news during class “can make a tremendous impact on how students learn to better write, read and think critically, as well as become better future citizens to participate in our democracy” (p. 36).

Winter believed that providing students with information about current events in all subjects could increase student engagement because the students would be interacting with the world around them in all subjects. This would bring interdisciplinary studies into the classroom because students would use the skills learned through reading comprehension to make connections in other subjects (Winter, 2008, p. 36). The connection between subjects would also be clear as students examined current events. For example, if students read about the effects of climate change in the science classroom and form meaningful opinions on climate change and our world, they may also be following the social studies curriculum by examining the role governments play in fighting climate change and learning about the opinions of others, as well as using language skills to investigate opinions and policies surrounding climate change. Using the media in the classroom also allows students to explore the importance of having access to free and transparent media, one of the basic democratic ideals that affects students everyday as they examine and learn about the world.

Engagement Through Student Choice

Many researchers (Boatright & Allman, 2018; Campbell, 2019; Collins et al., 2019; Hunt & Hunt, 2005; Lent & Pipkin, 2013) discussed the importance of student choice in the school and classroom communities. Allowing students choices gives them autonomy and engages them because they must experience and live with their choices. Choice is a valuable tool with which the school staff can ensure that students can relate and respond to the curriculum. There is a plethora of ways schools can use student choice, such as allowing students to choose their own

texts, allowing students to create their own assignments, and even allowing students to make choices and change at the school level.

Through democratic education, students can become engaged by using the evaluation process. Involving students in decision making regarding rubrics, assignment instructions, and assignment outcomes can hook students into the evaluation process (Hunt & Hunt, 2005; Yu, 2007). Yu (2007) found that negotiating scoring keys and summaries proved to be extremely valuable and “motivated students to become intensely involved with the text and more critical of their responses” (p. 544). Hunt and Hunt (2005) had similar success when allowing students to be a part of the assignment process. In Hunt’s classroom, students were able to determine what the assignment would include, as well as a schedule for completing the assignment and giving feedback for the following assignments. Hunt “was amazed by the quality of the input that students gave when [he] asked them to think about and share how the writing assignment could meet their needs and the needs of the school” (Hunt & Hunt, 2005, p. 106). Although finding extra time in the classroom to give students the space to explore assignment criteria may prove difficult, empowering students through this process allows them to take ownership of their assignments and value the work they are completing. This process, however, can also make the classroom environment more uncertain.

Boatright and Allman (2018) discussed the value of uncertainty in the classroom. In a democratic society, no voices can opt out and everyone needs to be heard; therefore, “democratic practices also by their very nature invite a level of uncertainty” (p. 2). Uncertainty needs to be welcomed in schools because it allows for growth and change (Boatright & Allman, 2018; Campbell, 2019; Hunt & Hunt, 2005). Hunt and Hunt (2005) stated that giving students choice in a democratic setting can create student success, but it can just as easily lead to failure because

students sometimes make bad choices. However, that is an important part of the learning process, as teachers can help students learn from their failures. As Hunt related, “that’s how I’ve learned some of my best lessons as a teacher from the experiences and decisions that blew up in my face. Students, too, can benefit from such experiences” (Hunt & Hunt, 2005, p. 107).

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Many studies highlighted the success of student choice in the classroom, especially with the reading and writing process usually pursued in language arts classes (Boatright & Allman, 2018; Campbell, 2019; Hunt & Hunt, 2005; Yu, 2007). Boatright and Allman studied a Grade 9 class given the opportunity to choose their own books for a year. They concluded that “books chosen by the students keep them engaged in their education. Not only does it give students a variety in reading material, it teaches them independence and self-regulation” (Boatright & Allman, 2018, p. 2). They witnessed engagement with the chosen novels, and students “took risks in what they shared about their connections to the novels; showed respect while other perspectives were shared; and exhibited compassion and empathy when talking about how the

issues in the novels reflected their own lived experiences” (Boatright & Allman, 2018, p. 7) because they knew their voices, and the voices of others mattered. Campbell (2019) noticed that providing scaffolding to students in support of reading the texts, as well as routines and structures to support the chosen texts, helped to keep the students accountable. Literature circles can help place accountability on students and allow students to make their own choices and see their choices through (Boatright & Allman, 2018; Campbell, 2019). By placing students in literature circles, students can open in discussions with their peers about their chosen texts, make connections, agree or disagree about the literature and work together on assignments to embody democratic ideals such as freedom of expression and opinions and collaboration.

Lent and Pipkin’s (2013) book *Keep Them Reading: An Anti-censorship Handbook for Educators* also highlighted the importance of student choice when selecting novels. The authors discussed censorship that occurs if teachers or schools are choosing novels for students. As Hytten (2015) noted, “no teaching is neutral, all teachers are partisan in some ways” (p. 3); this statement echoes the problematic approach of having teachers exclusively select novels. New opinions and partisan voices emerge if students are given choice in novel selection, and the reading process is encouraged because students can have the opportunity to read what is important to them and this engages them with their reading. Lent and Pipkin (2013) also discussed that allowing students to pick their own novels means students will have to defend their choices. Learning to make a defense creates a culture of communication between the classroom and the students’ homes, as well as empowers students by having them explain their choices (Lent & Pipkin, 2013, p. 103).

The Role of Deliberative Democracy in Student Engagement and Empowerment

Deliberative democracy at the school level prioritizes talking and communication. It “should draw on multiple perspectives; prioritise public goods and general interests over sectional interest; include moments of collaboration, contestation, and consensus” (Huckle, 2015, p. 79). Using deliberative democracy in the classroom will help prioritize all student voices as students learn to navigate between their own thoughts and the opinions of others. Mayes et al. (2019), discussed a variety of positive impacts that occur from utilizing student voice, such as engagement and motivation, self-esteem, confidence, communication skills, peer relationships, skills in working with others and accepting other people’s ideas and leadership and citizenship skills (p. 158). Opportunities for student voice allow students to think about their own opinions, how their opinions may impact others and how to vocalize their opinions in a respectful manner all of which are efforts supported by deliberative democracy. To utilize deliberative democracy in the classroom, teachers would make sure students know how to state arguments, defend them with reason and listen to and reflect on what other people are saying.

Engaging in these discussions empowers students because they will learn how to come to a consensus with each other. By using their own voices as well as learning about listening, students can explore discourses, arguments, and issues with their classmates. This process can create strong relationships in the classroom and allow students to become more engaged in discussions as they realize that their opinions need to be heard in the democratic process (Mayes et al., 2019, p. 163).

Community Engagement and Empowerment Through School Opportunities

Woywod and Deal (2016) discussed the importance of interdisciplinary teaching in promoting democratic ideals. For them, this was intertwined with community engagement. By allowing students the opportunity to go out into the community and participate as community

members, students engaged “transformation, courage and sustainability” (Woywod & Deal, 2016, p. 51). Community engagement in this example meant going out to meet local artists and interact with them so students would be able create their own art piece. Woywod and Deal (2016) allowed this project to include all subject matters and believed the interdisciplinary collaboration on behalf of the teachers allowed students to create meaningful connections in their community (p. 53). Community engagement in this example meant going out to meet local artists and interact with them so students would be able to create their own art piece. Woywod and Deal allowed the students to include all types of subject matter and believed the interdisciplinary collaboration by teachers would allow students to create meaningful connections in their community (p. 53). This example of community involvement for learning showed that it could be a great opportunity for students to work on collaboration, community engagement and freedom of expression. It also exposes students to new opinions and values outside of their normal classroom environment, and whether they agree with those new opinions, students learn how to interact with people who are different from the people in their everyday school community. When students went out into the community, they were very engaged and interested in the new learning opportunity (Woywod & Deal, 2016, p. 50). This was evident from the questions they asked and the connections they made. The students took tremendous pride was taken in their final assignment because it allowed them to demonstrate to the artist what they had learned (Woywod & Deal, 2016, p. 50).

Research shows that schools can also practice democratic ideals outside of the classroom (Hyttén, 2015; Selvaratnam, 2013; Wotherspoon, 2014; Woywod & Deal, 2016) and that volunteering is another way students can engage themselves in the community. Volunteering allows students to focus on skills such as teamwork, communication, exploration, and growth.

These skills allow students to see the world outside of the school setting and explore new situations which keeps engagement levels high and allows students to make connections between their schooling experience and their community. Democracy heavily focuses on community involvement because it can motivate citizens to ask what the government can do to support their community; for students, this might mean learning how to become active members of their community. Community engagement is a great way to get students connected and involved in global citizenship, which as discussed earlier, pertains to many democratic ideals. By learning about local, provincial, or national issues, students can relate to the community and learn how to connect to those outside of themselves.

Dewey also supported community engagement through experiential learning “as it offers students a hands-on, collaborative learning experience, which helps them to learn new skills and knowledge” (Sikandar, 2015, p. 193). For Dewey (1916) this was defined as service learning. He believed service learning allows students to engage in their communities and work towards the greater community (Giles & Eyler, 1994, p. 81). The combination of service with student learning creates an environment for students to connect to the outside world and practice reflective thinking while working with others. When Selvaratnam (2013) asked the important question of whether students benefit from community engagement, she concluded,

Students have shown that they are able to organize themselves to form a committee, have scheduled meetings, record their minutes, circulate for updates among sub-committee and steering committee members. They worked well as a team and exhibited their maturity in making informed decisions and getting a consensus. (p. 128)

This statement shows that students learned valuable skills and processes by engaging in the community. Selvarantnam (2013) went on to state, “[t]here was an increase in the level of

academic performance, life skills, civic and social responsibility, and personal development of the students” (p. 128). She based this statement on her testing of skill acquisition through a pretest and a post-test.

Student Councils as Tools of Student Empowerment

Students can learn the skills associated with community engagement and volunteering through their school community. This is often done through volunteer initiatives to support the school or in the form of student councils. Many times, the use of student councils, the collection of student voices, and other ways to engage students with the school community are only focused on extracurricular activities and not on the educational process itself (Cannon, 2017). In fact, Mager and Nowak (2011) found that school councils can have negative effects on changes of rules or policies because the council members’ ideals and suggestions may not be presented to the student body or acted upon. Additionally, sometimes student councils are merely token organizations in which the council members are chosen by school staff according to who they think will be appropriate, creating a “model that is familiar to adults and that can be influenced or shaped by them” (Andersson, 2019, p. 150). Having school staff involved in the process can take away from student voice and democratic practices intended for the council. Elections for a student council can also turn into popularity contests if the students running for the council do not have a chance to speak about why they are running.

Collins et al., (2019) described a school that allowed students to participate in hiring new teachers, creating new breakfast menus, and discussing the marking of assignments at the school level: “their input was valued as much as the administrations and taken very seriously” (p. 6).

The researchers believed that this empowered students by giving them direct input into their own

learning and taught them how to make careful decisions that could impact their school environment.

Student councils are a great way for students to have good opportunities for engaging with democracy and democratic ideals. Halfon and Romi (2021) discussed the ways in which student councils provide students with leadership skills, advance students' rights, promote a positive school climate, help educate students about democracy and motivate more volunteering in the school community (p. 127). Councils allow the practice of democratic ideals to play out in the school community. Instead of just learning about the ideals or creating some tangible experiences in the classroom, councils allow students to take control and exercise their own rights in a democracy. They also allow school staff to hear student voices in a formal setting to understand what is working or not working for students at school (Halfon & Romi, 2021, p. 114). Mayes et al., (2019) examined a student council where student representatives were active seeking to give other students a voice:

[t]his was frequently spoken about as a desire to “give” other students “a voice” and to not confine student voice to student leadership. In focus groups, students described how they had considered strategies to “give a voice” to younger students at their schools. (p. 164)

The student council opportunities allowed students to think about how they could use their voices for the betterment of all students; they were thinking collectively and not solely as individuals.

However, student councils can easily be used in an inefficient manner. Halfon and Romi (2021) found four types of student councils, those that focus on rights, volunteering, both or neither (p. 114). Councils that focus on rights became more popular across the globe after the

2009 Declaration of the Rights of the Child (Halfon & Romi, 2021, p.15). Student councils that focus on rights allowed students to “learn, recognize and live up to their rights and obligations as present and future citizens because they were actively involved” (Halfon & Romi, 2021, p. 129). Some examples of initiatives that were discussed in the student council focusing on rights were changing bell times to fit student schedules better, creating lunch programs, and working on adding new options to their curriculum. Councils that focus on volunteering allowed students to come up with ideas for volunteering or bettering their community. Some students set up community bottle drives, planted community gardens, and staged events hosted at the school. Councils that focused on volunteering allowed students to realize “personal values for the benefit of society and humankind, increasing belonging to society and the community, creating interpersonal relationships (...) and increasing the social environment’s esteem of the volunteer” (Halfon & Romi, 2021, p. 128).

Both volunteer councils and rights councils highlight important democratic ideals and allow students to practice those ideals in a safe learning environment with the support of the school community. Unfortunately, many student councils fail to represent student rights or volunteer opportunities. Teachers and school administrators need to relinquish control so a student council can step into the role and actively teach students democratic ideals.

Educational democracy does have the ability to engage and empower students. However, working towards this goal takes a combination of democratic ideals, teacher abilities and different techniques that can be used to help students explore their curriculum in different ways. Allowing students more choice, more connections with their community, more connections between subjects that they may be interested in and opportunities to make changes in their school and community allows students to be more engaged in their school and empowers them for the

future by demonstrating how they can be active citizens who are moving forward. Emphasizing democracy does not solely mean prioritizing social studies or discussions about government; it also means teaching students about their voices and power inside the classroom, so in the future they can use those tools to shape active democracy in their lives.

Addressing Racism with Educational Democracy

Dewey not only discussed his vision of a more democratic schooling system, but he also addressed how this system could support African American students. As a white philosopher at a time when inequality and racism were prevalent, “Dewey had realized that a plurality of cultures was a necessity for democratic living and intellectual growth” (Vaughan, 2018, p. 44). Dewey advocated for the expansion of democracy in all schools to support all students and “advocated for system-wide changes to political and economic systems that promoted equity” (Vaughan, 2018, p. 45). The “father of democratic schooling” was able to see the potential benefits for all students of participating in school democracy and to understanding how this could help students work together to further their own personal opinions, expressions, and voices to speak their own rights and truths. However, “Dewey failed to adequately confront racism, segregation, and concepts of white supremacy in schools” (Vaughan, 2018, p. 39). Dewey’s thoughts on racism and democratic schooling were only surface-level ones and he did not consider the important aspects of how a democratic school would have to adjust to support all students. Even though his intentions were pure, there were no discussions on whether African Americans students felt they were benefiting from democratic ideals being taught in schools. This next portion of the literature review hopes to take Dewey’s original intentions and determine whether democracy in schools does alleviate racism in schools.

Indigenous Education in Canada

Canada has a long history of segregation, mistrust, and institutional racism within its educational system, the justice system, and government and its policies. In many schools, Indigenous people are still invisible (Fan & Liu, 2020; Webb & Mashford, 2022; Wotherspoon, 2014). “Strong consensus exists among governments and educational agencies across Canada that urgent action to address serious and persistent gaps in educational attainment among indigenous people relative to other Canadians is a key priority” (Wotherspoon, 2014, p. 324). This demonstrated the need for Canadians to act, especially since, “[a]ttending a diverse school can help reduce racial bias and counter stereotypes” (Kahlenberg et al., 2019, p. 27). The learning needs to begin with the educational system because students who attend integrated schools are more likely to seek out integrated settings later in life (Kahlenberg et al., 2019, p. 27).

School teachers and leaders in Alberta are called to action to support Indigenous education through the Alberta Education *Teaching Quality Standard* and *Leadership Quality Standard*. Additionally, all Canadians are called to action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: *Call to Action* of 2015. Education is given specific priority, with undertakings such as developing culturally appropriate curricula, enabling parental and community involvement, allowing schools to utilize Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods in the classroom and “building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy and mutual respect” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: *Call to Action*, 2015, p.7). Democratic colonialism has been to blame for the treatment of Indigenous peoples across Canada, from the passage of the Indian Act of 1876 to the educating of Indigenous children in residential schools into the 20th century. This history can make it seem hypocritical to now rely on democratic education to work towards creating more equitable, post-racist schooling

systems for all Canadians. However, several themes have emerged, including education for school staff, curriculum changes, and community engagement. These themes will be examined to understand how they relate to democratic education and will be looked at specifically through the lens of Indigenous education in Canada, as well as racism in general in the schooling system.

Educating School Staff on Approaching Racism

“No teaching is neutral, all teachers are partisan in some ways” (Hyttten, 2015, p. 1). Teachers need to work on self-reflection, challenging their belief systems and learning about different cultures. Webb and Mashford-Pringle (2022) discussed how crucial this is for Indigenous students because education has been the site of oppression of Indigenous peoples for many years (p. 56). Developing strong relationships with students and their communities is an important effort for school staff to make to learn from their cultures of the students and communities (Webb & Mashford-Pringle, 2022, p.58). By engaging with students directly in the classroom, teachers are focusing on collaboration, respect for human rights, and community engagement. Allowing students’ voices to be heard through exploring students’ culture opens the classroom up to learning and the engagement of all students.

Teachers are critical role models for students at a delicate time in students’ lives. By focusing on democratic ideals, specifically respect for human rights, collaboration, and community engagement, students can acquire broader views of those who are different from them. Dođru and Demirbas (2021) studied the relationship between multicultural competence and democratic values. Their findings suggested that there is a large connection between the two for teachers who are culturally competent and have solid democratic values (p. 38). This link demonstrates that building on Dewey’s hope to include democratic ideals in schools is also creating students who are more culturally aware in their societies. The research noted that “living

with different cultures creates a culturally openminded and tolerant community” (Doğru & Demirbas, 2021, p. 26). However, in many school settings students are not “living together” (i.e., connecting) as they go through the day in their classrooms. If students are simply regurgitating assignments or are not pushed to be active members of their school community, they are not receiving the benefit of living with different cultures. They are simply coexisting with others as they race towards individualism.

Therefore, to facilitate the democratic values of multiculturalism, teachers should accept students’ biological, sexual, racial, religious, cultural, economic, and political differences as natural and, when planning teaching learning processes, highlight these differences and create a multicultural education environment to encourage positive attitudes toward differences. (Doğru & Demirbas, 2021, p. 27)

By implementing collaboration, voice, community engagement and accountability, students are learning to live with each other in the school community, and this allows learning opportunities to grow, the understanding of other cultures to deepen, and efforts to work together to improve the community to expand.

Almagor (2007) studied three examples of Holocaust deniers teaching their beliefs to students across Canada. After examining these situations, Almagor found multiple ways schools could use democratic ideals to promote racial understanding and help combat racism. For example, schools “should promote tolerance and offer bridges for understanding of the other, for reducing alienation, and for accommodating differences” (Almagor, 2007, p. 216). By utilizing collaboration, discourse and studies around the world, schools can support learning about different cultures and opinions regardless of the teachers’ opinions or beliefs about the world. Almagor noted that in all three examples where Holocaust deniers were promoting hatred in their

classrooms, the only opinion tolerated was the teacher's opinion (p. 217). Students were not allowed to raise a different perspective, and no other example or evidence was used that could help students to form their own opinions (Almagor, 2007, p. 217). Thus, "a relevant consideration is the teacher's reaction when confronted with students who challenge his or her views and do not accept them at face value" (Almagor, 2007, p. 238). This example of school staff who were exposing students to racist ideas demonstrates the important role staff have in the classroom. By exposing students to different perspectives, schools can work towards creating a more accepting and racism-free environment because all opinions can be heard with tolerance.

Examining the role school staff play in creating safe spaces for all students demonstrates that a supportive school environment can use democratic ideals to support the fight against racism in the school community. By listening to students' cultures and using student voices to learn about different cultures in the classroom, teachers can expose themselves and their students to different perspectives while managing an inclusive and safe environment for the expression of these ideas.

Developing a Curriculum That Promotes Cross-Cultural Understanding

Indigenizing Canada's curriculum could be an important step towards combating the stigma against educational gap for Canada's first peoples. The 63rd call to action in Canada's Truth and Reconciliation report states, "Developing and implementing Kindergarten to Grade Twelve curriculum and learning resources on Aboriginal peoples in Canadian history, and the history and legacy of residential schools" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action, 2015, p. 7). Curriculum change would expose all teachers and students to the truths about residential schools, as well as broaden the cultural learning of Indigenous peoples across Canada.

Mahabeer (2018) discussed the importance of decolonizing the curriculum of South Africa so it would fit the needs of all students, instead of taking the Eurocentric view, which neglects many, including the indigenous people of South Africa. Mahabeer called on teachers to allow “indigenous people to recognise and draw on their past experiences, knowledge and understandings in becoming critically conscious, while envisioning future possibilities so that they can make sense of transforming” (p. 3). This process of learning for indigenous people is in line with important democratic ideals, such as voice, collaboration, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. By encouraging minority students in classrooms to utilize their own unique experiences, schools are acknowledging that those experiences have value and should be valued in the school. Focusing on the critical consciousness of all students, new voices will be heard as students collaborate, learn, and respect each other’s opinions going forward. Kahlenberg et al., (2019) concluded that “[i]ntegrated classrooms can improve students’ satisfaction, intellectual self-confidence, and leadership skills” (p. 27). By having a curriculum that is more integrated with learnings from other cultures, all students are benefiting and embracing democratic ideals.

Many scholars (Mahabeer, 2018; Webb & Mashford-Pringle, 2022; Wotherspoon, 2014) believed the key to making schools more racially accepting places is through curriculum change. By decolonizing the curriculum or opening current curriculums to resources that stretch beyond the point of view embodied in white privilege, all students can learn and experience school through different lenses. Mahabeer understood that changing a curriculum to be more suited for all students is a difficult process because the way we think about curriculum is ever-changing, “beset by major dilemmas and contradictions, socio-economic and political deliberations” (p. 2). A curriculum that is flexible and has room to include more democratic practices can change with

the political landscape to include important discussions of local and national interests. The role of community engagement and collaboration is to help schools become more democratic places with more flexible curricula that can suit the needs of all students. Indigenous students may want their curriculum to focus on decolonization and include more historical knowledge and wisdom keeping. African American students who are wanting to learn about systematic racism in their country may ask for the democratic curriculum that meets their needs without prioritizing the status quo. This shift will allow the main learning at the school level to be a collaborative effort, with discussions, voices, current events, and transparency at the center of the learning process, instead of a process that relies on textbooks that address every specific curriculum outcome.

McGregor (2013) supported the notion of a flexible curriculum and defined it as the flexibility to discuss modern human rights and multiculturalism in the same conversation as cultural notions of responsibility and Indigenous sovereignty. “It means encouraging students to be critical of the world around them in ways that may not have been traditionally part of Inuit practice, and yet respectful of that which is sacred in their culture and other cultures” (p. 103). Using democratic practices, teachers can make sure the curriculum is being taught while also making sure that students are engaging in discussions that promote democratic learning. Flexible curricula allow teachers and students the time to explore important topics that may come up depending on which students are the classroom. This is important when thinking about the beliefs of Dođru and Demirbas’ (2021) regarding multiculturalism in democratic classrooms. All classrooms will look different; some may have all Indigenous students and others may have more diversity or communities that have immigrated together. The differing perspectives of multiculturalism that may come up in a classroom cannot be predicted, and conversations that will be important in that classroom cannot be defined. A flexible curriculum will support the

learning of students and staff in the school so they can take the space to address racism in a democratically informed way.

Creating Opportunities for Community Engagement

As Woywod and Deal (2016) noticed, allowing students to have the opportunity to go out in the community creates valuable learning opportunities and efforts for collaboration and the understanding of different situations and opportunities (p. 49). This endeavor can also be applied to working towards a more inclusive schooling environment for all students. Engaging with the minorities in the community will allow students who are minorities to see themselves as part of their community, as well as give students of different races the opportunity to learn about others outside of the classroom. These opportunities are important because they cannot always be provided by the teacher or school especially if the school is lacking in diversity among staff members.

“Relationship building with Indigenous community partners is a key element to pre-service teacher programming that in turn decolonizes public classrooms” (Webb & Mashford-Pringle, 2022, p. 57). This is particularly important for Indigenous communities because many of their teachings come from elders and not inside the classroom experiences. It is important for schools to engage with the community; this promotes a democratic ideal of allowing students to learn through connections and to explore teachings and knowledge that cannot be delivered inside the four walls of a classroom. Relying on elders or community members is a great opportunity for teachers and students to learn about traditional knowledge and work towards healing as a community (Webb & Mashford-Pringle, 2022, p. 60).

Democratic education does not inherently combat racism in the school communities. Although many of its practices, such as communicating, listening to the opinions of others and

exploring and learning about human rights and free speech, are in line with anti-racist practices, the research shows that simply prioritizing democratic ideals is not enough. The historical roots of colonial democracy illustrate how easy it is for a democracy to only prioritize those already in power while simultaneously marginalizing those who need the most support. However, at its core, as Dewey (1916) believed, teaching democracy can support all students and open schools to become more safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments. Schools need to take an active role in making sure democratic ideals are supporting race relations in the classroom. The ideals can certainly support this effort, but school leaders and teachers cannot rely on democratic ideals to complete the task on its own.

School Leaders and Democratic Ideals

School leaders play a crucial role in determining the democratic ideals in a school setting because doing so takes patience, a key understanding of what democratic education can look like, and a focus on implementing the necessary skills at the district and school levels. Yet, it is important that leaders be well versed about the world of democratic education due to the large impacts it can have on the learning community.

Diminishing Control by School Leaders

School leadership can be governed by authoritarianism, dominance, and fear of losing control (Anderson, 2019, p. 149). These traits cause leaders to lack openness, collaboration, and responsibility, all of which need to be prioritized to support school democracy. Hunt and Hunt (2005) noted that teachers often control the books read, time and place for discussions, and even whether students can use the washroom; “Where is the democracy in getting permission to pee?” (p. 104). Even Hunt and Hunt’s 2005 article title: “New Voices: Students Are Ready For Democracy if the Teachers Can Handle It” demonstrated that it is often school leaders and

teachers who are choosing not to engage in democratic practices in their school. There are a variety of reasons school leaders may want to hold onto control over their schools, such as the simplicity of doing so, a lack of time to pursue other options, a concern that student discipline will falter in a more democratic system, a lack of funding for new initiatives, a lack of trust that other options will work, or simply a belief that they know best based on their education and experience. It is important for school leaders to recognize the reasons they may be holding back on engaging students more in the school community because doing so may help them decide how to move forward in supporting school democracy.

If school leaders are to relinquish some control to allow the voices of students and democratic ideas to be manifested in their schools and classrooms, they need to start by making sure information is transparent. At the district level, information regarding evidence types, resource management and informed decision-making processes is needed for all educators to understand district goals and decisions (Faubert, 2019, p. 970). By including more information on curriculum goals or the hiring process, school leaders at the district level could help education departments become more democratic, which in turn would support leaders at the school level to include teachers and students in their democratic learning. It is difficult for school leaders to prioritize democratic teachings if leaders at the district level are not doing this as well. By leading through transparency, school leaders can communicate more effectively with students and order to engage them in dialogue about school processes. This was illustrated in an article by Collins et al. (2019), which discussed how students could be a part of the hiring process (p. 3). By informing students about the hiring process and what kind of educators the school was looking for and the important questions the school leaders believed were made on new hires, the

hiring process became more transparent, and the school community participated in meaningful and innovative ways.

When discussing democratic ideals, it is important that school leaders lead by example. Democratic education does not begin or end at the classroom door, and it is important to understand the value of leading school students and staff with democratic practices. As shown in this literature review, democratic education can engage and empower students on a variety of levels, and, thus, it can be determined that it can do the same for staff members. By prioritizing teachers' voices, allowing teachers to involve themselves in meaningful discussions and debates when working through school problems, prioritizing different opinions and perspectives, and allowing teachers more choice in their classrooms; new perspectives, ideas and collaborations would be possible at the school level. By leading teachers through democratic ideals, teachers will be able to better implement these practices in their classroom.

Understanding and Responding to the Larger Societal Context

The Alberta Education *Leadership Quality Standard* is in accordance with democratic education through two of its main standards: understanding and responding to the larger societal context and fostering effective relationships (Alberta Education, 2020). As discussed in Chapter 1 of this capstone study, there is a prevalent societal context for democratic teaching. As citizens across the world work to maintain fair and understanding democracies, schools can help support the important democratic ideals that empower citizens by teaching the fundamentals at the school level. This can be done at a macro level through pedagogical practices such as collaboration and student choice, or at a micro level by including more discussions of political, economic, and social events occurring around the world. By responding to this social context, leaders can specifically focus on the school community and how to relate the local, provincial, national, and

international issues and trends to the school community. This can specifically be seen through the context of racism. Racism, an issue that spans all communities, can be addressed, and explored through democratic teaching, and this will allow leaders to prioritize the issue in their school community.

School leaders need to uphold democratic ideals in their school; to benefit from these ideals, they need to be well versed in the larger societal context. Taking an active role in community engagements, listening to community members, and learning about national and international issues on a global scale are no easy tasks, but it is necessary for these issues and trends to be brought into the classroom for learning and engagement. If school leaders are leading by example, this effort can be made across the whole school community. If school democracy is functioning effectively in the school community, school leaders, teachers, and students may all bring local, provincial, national, and international issues to the table to be discussed and examined through various learning processes. This will also be more accessible if meaningful relationships have been established by the school leaders.

Fostering Effective Relationships Among School Leaders, Staff and Students.

For ideas to be put forward staff and students need to feel as though they are a part of a safe learning environment, as was discussed when this capstone study examined the role school democracy can play in combating racism. As Boatright and Allman (2018) explained, a degree of uncertainty is present when different choices and voices are allowed to be heard in the school community (p. 2). As a leader, it can be difficult not to exert control over situations that make situations easier and solve issues efficiently. However, the reward of allowing for collaboration and learning through democratic ideals can lead to valuable learning and engagement. A safe environment allows for new ideas and perspectives to be brought forth, even if those ideas are

not popular. This safe environment, committed to by school leaders, can only develop through the fostering of effective relationships.

Fostering effective relationships also allow school leaders to determine the strengths of their staff members. This is extremely important when a school is operative as a democratic school because in a democracy, everyone can work together to tackle a problem from multiple perspectives, depending on areas of interest or expertise. Understanding the strengths of individuals on a team is important to school leaders. Hytten (2015) discussed this her reflections on Holocaust deniers in the educational system, pointing out that all teachers are partisan, and no teaching is neutral (p. 5). By asking teachers to involve students in more discourse, and bring political, economic, and social issues to the forefront of the classroom, there will be more room for teacher interests and strengths to be involved in the classroom. By knowing the school staff well, school leaders can utilize these interests to the advantage of all to create a more holistic approach to the democratic schooling system. For example, teachers that are more politically involved may be interested in supporting a student council and learning how to involve students without forcing their own opinions onto the students, whereas teachers who are more interested in the sciences might want to create environmental groups at the school to help the community and may not be interested in learning or deciding how a student council could efficiently be run. One side effect of allowing more interests and strengths to be acknowledged in the school community is that leaders may also be opening spaces into which opinions and biases can seep. Contemporary issues in the classroom environment can help democratic learning because,

[d]emocratic education requires dynamic educators who can help students bring past events (and school lessons more generally) critically to bare on contemporary issues; it requires supportive school administrators; and, perhaps most important, it requires a

general social commitment to public schools that prioritizes and supports students' development into thinking, engaged citizens. (DeCesare, 2016, p. 2)

It is the job of school leaders to create a shared vision among students and teachers about the prioritizing of engagement and learning inside the classroom, as well as the outer school dynamics. This process will take time and trials and errors as educators learn the best approaches for their students and community. All staff members need to be involved and on board with prioritizing democracy in the classroom; otherwise, the fundamental knowledge and experience that will come with the practice will be lost. It is not a process that can be completed by halfway measures. This was seen with the school councils that had a negative impact on school change (Mager & Nowak, 2011, p. 38). Simply having a school council does not make the school a democratic institution. It takes teacher learning, student learning and a focus on collaboration and student voices, as well as follow-through actions on the part of the staff, for a student council to influence students. Stamina, follow-through actions, and reflection are needed, and they need to be led by the school leader to create meaningful change in the school environment.

Knowledge of Democratic Education

By examining the research on the impact of democratic education on racism in the school community, the successful practices of racially sensitive school communities and democratic school communities stem from the teacher's role in the classroom. As Dođru and Demirbas (2021) stated, "teachers need to have skills of self-understanding, understanding the cultures of others, and academic-multicultural competences" (p. 27) to prioritize multicultural understanding and democratic values. Support for teacher learning and self-understanding has to be prioritized by school leaders. By fostering effective relationships and leading with the heart, leaders can

focus on meeting each teacher where they are and continuing to foster each teacher's self-growth and improved understanding of multiculturalism so they can better support students.

Leaders can support democratic education in their schools by ensuring they have knowledge about what works and does not work at the school level. For example, Onosko (2011) discussed the critical failures of the U.S race-to-the-top educational system and its specific harm to democracy. The plan focused on creating more high stakes testing to raise achievement scores in mathematics and language arts. Onosko believed “[t]he plan threatens our democracy due to students’ reduced capacity for informed decision making” (p. 3). If schools are only prioritizing tests and not “young people’s social perspectives, cultural appreciations, sense of time, place and wonder, aesthetic preferences, and many other areas of interest and understanding” (Onosko, 2011, p. 9), they are failing to an important degree. The failure of the No Child Left Behind mandate and the recurring failure of the race-to-the-top system demonstrated that working towards higher standardized testing limits discussion, collaboration, perspectives, and cultural understandings that are important in creating a democratic classroom. School leaders need to be aware of the political trends that could get in the way of a democratic school system and combat these polarizing ideas with ways to either integrate the two or to focus on what can engage students and help them succeed.

In Simon Sinek’s 2011 book *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* he discussed the importance of knowing the answer to the question why and using this answer for all other decisions. Why needs to drive the school community. School leaders need to know why their school should be more democratic. Should it be to challenge all students, to create empowered citizens, or to inspire school communities? “The role of a leader is not to come up with all the great ideas. The role of a leader is to create an environment in which great

ideas can happen” (Sinek, 2011, p. 99). School leaders need to inspire great ideas from all staff and students to grow a school community that is accepting, knowledgeable and collaborative.

School leaders need to vocalize the why, inspire a shared vision around the why, grow relationships with staff members and students to empower them to take part in the why, understand the societal context so the knowledge can stay relevant and useful, and continuously look at data or research on educational democracy, because it should not be a fixed state in the school but a growing mindset in which all school members participate. By inspiring these steps, school leaders can use educational democracy to engage and empower students and help combat the intergenerational trauma of democratic colonialism in our country.

Summary

Educational democracy is a very powerful classroom tool that can be used to help students collaborate, learn about their community, become more engaged by their curriculum, and be empowered to be active citizens in the future. Educators need to understand their role in educating the next generation, not just for their own future careers, but for the larger democratic community that needs educated citizens to ensure everyone participates in the government. If implemented well, educational democracy can inspire students to cooperate with their community; respect human rights, freedom of expression and opinions; and use their own voices to support these important ideals. However, much like the practice of democracy in our government systems, exploitation, colonialism, and elitism can occur if meaningful reflections and continuous dialogue are not used.

Implementing educational democracy cannot be done without a leader’s direction, change or continuous growth. This implementation will require the entire school communities’ reflection, time, and dedication to the learning of the democratic process. The power of school

democracy is that it can engage all members of the school community and highlight the strengths of those in the school building. By learning and growing together through community, collaboration and dialogue, school staff and students will be on a continuous path of growth and connection. This makes the school process more relatable, engaging and empowering for the students. When thinking about the future, democratic learning creates active citizens who have the skills and knowledge to participate in their government, much like Jefferson and Dewey envisioned.

In Chapter 3, the research is condensed into four recommendations that school leaders can use to implement democratic education and ideals in their schools to ensure the best learning for all students.

Chapter 3: Summary, Recommendations and Conclusions

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this capstone study was to explore the role of democracy in schools to determine if the implementation of educational democracy can engage and empower students in the classroom, and whether it can be used to eliminate racism in our school communities.

Through the literature review, multiple examples of educational democracy being used to its full potential demonstrated how it can make a difference at the school level for all students. It needs to be driven by school leaders who prioritize relationships in the school community and understand the societal context and how it relates to their school, and it also needs a continuous review of results and research to make sure a school is using democratic ideals to their full potential. Collins et al., (2019) noted,

Collectively, all participants felt that education ceases to be a set of standards to pass a test and takes on a process of readying the future generation with the skillset needed to make decisions and understand the implications of those decisions. Instead, it becomes a safe space for students to practice skill such as discussion, public speaking, and critical thinking with the guidance and support of educators they trust and know care for them.

While this may include writing letters to Congress representatives in fifth-grade classrooms, in a kindergarten classroom this can mean encouraging them to take on different perspectives. (p. 6)

Understanding the role of educators in growing citizens and encouraging diversity through various learning processes is a crucial part of educational democracy. Chapter 3 explores recommendations school leaders and teachers can make in their classrooms, schools, and communities to encourage educational democracy and growth for all students.

Implications

What is the purpose of education? This is an important question that many educators answer or define throughout their careers. For Jefferson (1787) and Dewey (1916) the purpose of education was to create active citizens who could participate in a democratic government to sustain and lead change and continue to uphold the educational system. As citizens of a democratic nation, we are all affected by educational systems' decisions to engage with democracy to teach future voters about democratic ideals. Democracy is not a fixed state, and it is not guaranteed; everyone needs to work together to encourage a democratic system that supports all and encourages debate, growth, learning, collaboration, and rights for all citizens. This needs to be taught at the school level to ensure students are ready to engage in the ever-changing world. Our governmental system requires respect and efforts for advancement and improvement, but these efforts can only be accomplished if schools prioritize democratic ideals.

As demonstrated through the literature review, community engagement, which is an important aspect of democratic education, is a crucial aspect of democratic growth in a school; it affects both the schools and the communities near them. As Faubert (2019) noted, “[c]ommunity stakeholders offer important anecdotal evidence, in the form of histories, priorities, and values that speak to local-level concerns” (p. 974). Using community members and organizations to help support students in their learning can engage the community as a whole and makes sure the school is prioritizing the needs of its community. This engagement will allow communities to play a larger role in schools and student learning so parents, guardians, and members can participate in learning and growing the community through the schools. By promoting active citizenship through community engagement, each community benefits and its students learn

about becoming active citizens who can use their voices in democracy to prioritize their community.

Schools and students are the main stakeholders for including democratic education throughout the learning process. By allowing students to be participants in democratic ideals through learning and exploring the importance of these ideals, schools and students are learning with and from each other instead of from textbooks and standardized tests. Education should be focusing on the future of students' lives and how students can be active participants in their own futures. It should give students the tools to learn about the world around them through politics, economics, community involvement, the media, and critical thinking. If schools move towards focusing more on democratic ideals, they will engage and empower students to make their own decisions and have their own voices heard respectfully in the democratic process, as well as begin to help combat the racism and misinformation that are prevalent in our society today.

Recommendations

Recommendation #1: Utilize the student voice in the school and classroom

The student voice is a powerful classroom tool because it can motivate schools to prioritize what is important to their students. When students use their voices, they learn the benefits and the power of using them. Using student voices also allows opportunities for students to listen to each other and engage in meaningful discussions in which they can practice democratic ideals. Schools can implement four strategies for focusing on student voice: classroom discussions, student council meetings, advisories, and efforts to place an emphasis on effective relationships and a safe learning environment.

The Student Voice in Classroom Discussions

As Samuelsson (2018) stated, using discussions in the classroom allows for deliberative democracy to take place. “By posing a question that gives students the possibility to disagree on the matter, while at the same time giving them the opportunity to reach a collective conclusion, it is possible to steer classroom discussions in the direction of democratic deliberation” (p. 8). This allows students to come to a collective conclusion while building valuable skills around listening, perspective taking, and understanding multiple sides of a situation. Teachers can do this in the classroom with debates, group discussions or whole-classroom discussions in which students vocalize their opinions to other classmates. Prioritizing opinion-based essays also helps students defend their opinions; however, it is also important that students engage with those who disagree with them. By using problem-solving techniques, students can reach conclusions together and learn how to come to a consensus through discussions.

Samuelsson (2018) noted three types of discussions that can be utilized in the classroom to explore deliberative democracy: explorative discussion, problem-solving discussion, and predetermined discussion. An explorative discussion focuses on a pervasive disagreement with many contentious points of views for which striving towards a consensus is difficult. A problem-solving discussion focuses on a situation about which there is little disagreement and for which a clear consensus can be fairly easily reached by students. A predetermined discussion focuses on an issue for which students can reach a conclusion with few instances of disagreement, but not a consensus. Depending on the topics or issues under discussion, students can practice being engaged in conversations that easily move towards a consensus or are more challenging. All three discussion types can be utilized in the classroom setting to explore deliberative democracy and have students use their voices (Samuelsson, 2018, p. 4).

Throughout the discussion process, it is important that teachers be aware of and educate themselves on racism in the classroom and the perspectives of minorities. These discussions can be powerful tools with which students can explore different cultures and the reasons why others may have different perspectives in a respectful manner, and the discussions need to take place in a safe learning environment. As Mahabeer (2018) stated, “Schools need flexible and agentic teachers who are connected to the realities of learners, and the colonising approach is lacking in locating alternate voices to inform” (p.1). This flexibility is crucial in the discussion process as teachers need to perpetuate a safe and respectful learning environment for all students and lead in a sustainable, positive manner.

The Student Voice in Student Councils

Schools should implement a formal student participation group that allows students to make meaningful change from inside the school. It is important that this change not be merely on the surface and instead be meaningful to the school environment. Student councils provide great opportunities for students to practice their democratic voices in a formal setting that allows teachers and school administrators to hear directly from students about the changes they believe need to be made to make the school more successful. Andersson’s research came up with student lists of what they believed were the important roles teachers and school leaders must take for student participation to be successful:

1. Gather the student council.
2. Hold the meetings.
3. Govern everything regarding the council.
4. Make sure that everyone turns up.
5. Inform.

6. Keep order in the meetings.
7. Present information to the principal.
8. Pass on information/suggestions
9. Steer the conversation and make sure that every student makes their voice heard.
10. Teach things.
11. Keep order in the class. (Andersson, 2019, p. 157)

However, the goal of the student council is for students to learn how to accomplish all the council tasks on their own throughout the year.

Student councils can be formed by elections of class representatives, but it is important that school staff ensure they do not become popularity contests. This can be managed by asking students to speak about the things they would like to change and sharing their goals and priorities for the school or by having representatives divided by each class. In some situations, it may be possible to have student councils be volunteer based so any students who want to can participate. Student councils need to meet on a weekly or biweekly basis with clear roles assigned so student can stay on topic and make sure meetings are successful. Teacher and administrators need to monitor the meetings to ensure their success while also making sure they are not influencing the students or the student voice. The student council needs to always be a learning organization. If students propose a program that is not feasible or accessible for the school, teachers and school leaders need to explain the reasons this is so, so students can understand why the school would have to say no to their suggestions (Hunt & Hunt, 2005, p. 105).

The Student Voice in Advisories

“Advisories—or special homeroom or flex periods curated for racial, economic, linguistic, and ability diversity—can help students connect both with one another and with a

teacher mentor/adviser” (Kahlenberg et al., 2019, p. 28). Carving out time in the school day for students to explore issues with one another in a more informal setting than a subject-based class allows students to make meaningful, genuine connections. There are many opportunities for this designated time to be used by students and teachers. For example, in elementary schools, students can participate in buddy classes, where mentoring occurs, and students are able to work together to accomplish a task. In older grades, this flex period can be used for an activity the students enjoy, such as music, sports, or art, where teambuilding can occur with like-minded students. It is also possible for schools to use this time for meetings of student leadership groups such as student councils, so all students can sit in on meetings or participate in them, or it can be used for community engagement. This time can also help students and teachers prioritize effective relationships.

Fostering Student Relationships and Building a Safe Learning Environment

For students to feel comfortable using their voices in the school setting, school staff need to make sure they build relationships with students so that students feel safe. All teachers need to prioritize relationships with all students and understand that students' perspectives may not always be the same but that they are important and need to be heard. By understanding this, teachers can help students use their voices and listen to the voices of others in formal and informal classroom settings. Kahlenberg et al. (2019) stated, “schools should work to establish a culture that normalizes and encourages relationships across lines of difference in educational settings” (p. 28). Relationships between students, but also between students and teachers to encourage responsibility, acceptance, and accountability for all members of the school community.

Fostering effective relationships and building a safe environment is especially important for minority students. To promote an inclusive learning environment, school staff need to be aware of different cultures, understandings, and perspectives. The Alberta *Leadership Quality Standard* (2020) lists “establishing relationships with First Nations, Métis and Inuit parents/guardians, Elders/knowledge keepers, local leaders and community members” (p. 4) under the first standard of fostering effective relationships to acknowledge the importance of building relationships with minority students and their families.

Recommendation #2: Prioritize Student Choice in the School and Classroom

Student choice is a powerful tool for helping students feel empowered in their learning environment. It allows students to use critical thinking to make decisions and defend their learning. It also teaches students accountability and autonomy because they are responsible for their decisions rather than following choices placed on them. “In democratic classrooms, there is space for students to explore their actions and the consequences themselves. In doing this, students are empowered to take part in their education in a meaningful way as democratic members of their learning community” (Collins et al., 2019, p. 5). Student choice allows students to become individuals in the classroom and prioritizes their learning by letting them become active agents in the process rather than having the process be a consequence of the educational system. There are multiple ways in a school day in which a teacher can ensure that students are having the right to choose. Two ways teachers can implement student choice in the classroom are literature circles and assessments.

Student Choice in Literature Circles

Boatright and Allman (2018), Lent and Pipkin (2013), and Campbell (2019) all advocated for literature circles to promote student choice. Allowing students to choose which book they

want to read and reflect on that book with peers is engaging because students feel empowered by their decision and motivated by the peer group. This is a great way to ensure democratic learning through choice, critical thinking, discussions and working together. Students need to be aware of the choices they could make and be able to defend why they have chosen a certain novel. Lent and Pipkin (2013) wanted teachers and students to understand that “[students], not the teacher, must defend their reading choices” (p. 17). It is important that students understand why they are reading a text to give the reading a more meaningful experience.

There are many ways choice can be used in literary circles. Some teachers have allowed students to pick a book from a list of books; after reviewing the choices, students were able to pick the book they believed would best suit their assignments. It is also possible to let students pick any book they wish, and the teacher can create literary circles based on the book that share similar themes. In this format, students are not subjected to only a few options, but the discussions in the literary circles may not be as meaningful since students are reading different books. Lent and Pipkin (2013) noted,

Literature circles are another best practice employed by the authors in promoting the culture of reading and student choice in the classroom. If the practice of literature circles is part of the culture of reading and student choice, then it is quite normal for students to be reading different texts at the same time. (p. 108)

In some literature circles, students read different texts at the same time in the classroom environment because having all students read the same novel may not engage each individual student. This process also helps students who are reading at different levels than their classmates and allows texts from different cultures to enter the classroom.

Discussions throughout the reading process promote student voice. Boatright and Allman (2018) noted that while participating in literature circles, “students stormed through the door demanding answers for questions such as, ‘Why in the world did Will Henry do that?’ (...) The students were emotionally involved and attached to these characters. (...) what students said during literature circles was illuminating” (p. 5). The promotion of student choice allows students to feel more investment, and this gives them reasons to utilize their voices in the classroom, as well. The connection between student voice and choice can also be played out in the classroom through assessment choice.

Student Choice in Assessments

Hunt and Hunt (2005), Boatright, and Allman (2018), and Yu (2007) discussed the value in having students involved in the assessment process. This encouraged student choice as well as student voice and gave students a more first-hand experience that made them more involved and vested in the entire learning process. Although this process may take more time, it is extremely valuable to have students think about what they would like to be assessed on and have a full understanding of what the goals of the assignment are. There are two main ways teachers can utilize choice through assessment, whole-group assessment, or individualized assessment.

Whole-class discussions can be used to determine the aspects of an assignment on which the class should be assessed. Hunt and Hunt (2005) remember dedicating a period to the rubric-making process in which students would offer suggestions as to what were the most important aspects of the assignment. Students had to practice democratic ideals by working together to offer suggestions and make improvements to the rubric to make sure everyone agreed with the final product. Even though this took a whole period, Hunt and Hunt believed the process was

worth the time because having students interact, listen, collaborate, and work together for a final product was invaluable learning.

Students could also have choice through individual assessments. Instead of having the whole class marked on one rubric, students could determine how they would like to be assessed on their project without the commitment of the entire class. This allowed students to prioritize what they found important and make decisions for their own learning.

Recommendation #3: Ensure Community Involvement

Service Learning and the Community

Dewey (1916) recommended four steps for making sure service learning and community work were engaging for students throughout their classes:

1. Must generate interest
2. Must be worthwhile intrinsically
3. Must present problems that awaken new curiosity and create a demand for information
4. Must cover a considerable time span and be capable of fostering development over time.

These steps ensure that service learning is supporting student learning and creating long-term success for both the students and the community.

Teachers can also bring the community into the classroom. Winter (2008) suggested bringing in local professionals to speak with students, using newspapers to include current events in the curriculum or creating a “What’s in the News” bulletin board that would motivate discussions (p.35). These efforts could help students engage with the community on a regular basis even if they were not able to participate in larger service learning projects

Teachers need to ensure that students are engaging with different cultures and ethnicities through the community. For example, bringing elders into the classroom to teach students traditional ways of knowing is a great tool to help Indigenous and non-Indigenous students learn about the history and knowledge of Indigenous cultures (McGregor, 2013, p. 97). Learning from community members supports teachers in ensuring that students are learning from a variety of sources. This may mitigate the biases of teachers, who have their own opinions and beliefs that can come across in the classroom environment (McGregor, 2013, p. 106).

Encouraging Global Citizenship

DiCicco (2016) discussed a high school that implemented a global citizenship course in which students discussed a variety of topics that were affecting the world on a global scale and were also affecting their communities (p. 13). Implementing global citizenship learning throughout the curriculum allows students to reflect on global issues and their complexity, how the issues affect their communities and how students can impact or make a difference on the issues. Issues such as sustainability, human rights or polarization could be the focus of reflection. A consideration of global citizenship could be implemented in each school through a single course, as DiCicco (2016) described, or through several courses on interdisciplinary subjects because each issue could pertain to different subjects and be explored in a multitude of ways. As Winter (2008) suggested, using current events in a variety of classes allows students to examine global issues, global citizenship and how to use democratic ideals to make global connections (p. 36).

Connecting with Families

Involving the community also allows a deeper connection between school and home. Teachers can connect to students' homes in a variety of ways, such as newsletters, encouraging

students to bring discussions home, allowing students to explore their heritages and communicating with parents and guardians about student progress and choices. Lent and Pipkin (2013) discussed bridging the gap between school and home by encouraging students to defend their literary choices at home (p. 203). This effort could make it easier for students to involve their families and made associations between what they are learning and discussing at school and how it might affect their home life. Having students understand the larger impact of their learning in this way allows them to see themselves as future citizens who have the power to make decisions for their own families.

Having assignments that encourage students to reflect on their home life, culture or worldview is another way teachers can connect with families. Sharing these findings in a class setting also allows students to learn from each other's families. This helps create a culture of sharing and understanding in the classroom, as well as prioritizing students' families and the larger community.

Finally, teachers can make sure to communicate with home and grow relationships with the family members of their students. Whether through phone calls, emails, newsletters or other forms of communication, families can become an important part of the classroom environment. Again, this will help connect student learning to the home community.

Recommendation #4: Provide Continuous Support for Teachers and School Staff.

To bring all the recommendations listed to fruition, a tremendous amount of support and knowledge from teachers and school leaders are needed. Merging democratic ideals into a curriculum and student learning activities requires a high level of commitment in terms of knowledge, growth, and continuous development of teachers. "Teachers are agents of social change that empower their students and support democratic values. Therefore, teachers must be

aware of the strong influence they have on the ways of thinking, decision-making, behaving, and defining events” (Doğru & Demirbas, 2021, p. 27). Teachers must be supported by each other and school leaders to sustain democratic learning in their classrooms and schools. There are three standards of the Alberta Education *Leadership Quality Standard* (2020) that will specifically aid in the support for teachers in this process: fostering effective relationships, modeling commitment to professional learning and understanding and responding to the larger societal context.

Fostering Effective Relationships

Just as it is important for school staff to prioritize relationships with students and community members, it is also important to have strong relationships between school staff. School leaders must ensure they have a strong relationship with their staff to encourage a positive learning environment where everyone feels supported and heard. Since teachers play such a crucial role in delivering democratic ideals to the classroom, they need the support of each other and their administration for this to be a reality.

Collaboration between staff is a great way to encourage relationships. Allowing staff schedules to line up so that teachers can work and spend time together encourages staff to communicate with each other. For example, if all Grade 6 students have gym at the same time, the Grade 6 teachers can work together during that time. Collaborative time can also be part of professional development days or staff meetings. Prioritizing collaboration gives teachers the needed time to work together and accomplish creative democratic activities for their classrooms. Allowing flexibility for teachers to work together shows a staff that the school is committed to making democracy a school-wide learning choice. Allowing staff to work together also creates opportunities for more diversity in the school environment. By listening to the ideas of others,

teachers can learn different perspectives and techniques and reflect on what will work best for each individual student in their class.

Celebrating small wins also helps encourage staff along the democratic education journey, as well as gives staff examples as to what works or does work in the classroom. Sharing in wins such as a good presentation from a community member, a successful literary circle, the changes implemented by the student council, or the strong examples of student voices described by staff in their classrooms encourages all teachers to continue the democratic journey and sparks ideals and interests. If democratic education can engage and empower students, it can also be able to engage and empower staff to allow their classrooms to be an active place where learning about and for the world can occur.

For schools to truly be democratic learning institutions, democratic ideals need to be applied throughout the school, not just for the students. Staff members should have the ability to make choices, use their voices, collaborate with others, determine their own strengths and weaknesses and work together to grow a democratic community within the school. School leaders can demonstrate this commitment by engaging with staff, encouraging discussions and collaboration between staff, and allowing staff to fail and succeed through different attempts at creating a classroom environment that is beneficial for everyone.

Modeling Commitment to Professional Learning

Educational democracy is not stagnant, it is ever changing from year to year and day to day in the school setting as students, staff and the community grow different opinions, try different strategies and learn different perspectives. This continuous state of change means that school staff need to continuously commit to professional learning to adapt to the needs of their school environment. Indicated by Kahlenberg et al. (2019) have noted,

Successful schools dedicate time and resources to ensure that teachers, staff, and administrators have the tools to model positive intergroup contact—with an emphasis on ensuring that such contact prioritizes equity by making space for and critically listening to the voices of marginalized populations. (p. 28)

Time and resources are two great elements that can ensure professional learning is taking place. It can occur while teachers are collaborating, during professional development days or what teachers are sharing new research that could help them prioritize democratic ideals. As Webb and Mashford-Pringle (2022) mentioned, this is especially important for listening to marginalized populations (p. 58). If educational democracy is going to help eliminate racism in a school, school staff need to prioritize learning about other cultures with their classes and with staff members. Professional development opportunities with elders, community members or those whose voices are lacking need to be prioritized in the school. This is also stated by Dođru and Demirbas (2021): “[i]n-service training related to the attitudes and values teachers should have in a multicultural education environment and the methods and techniques they should use can be organized for the teachers” (p. 34).

Professional learning also needs to occur in front of the students. Teachers need to make sure they are demonstrating professionalism in class discussions while listening to student voices and respecting student choices. Presenting professionalism to the students exemplifies how students need to behave when listening to the voices and choices of others, and how those who operate in a democracy should discuss differences or issues. If school staff prioritize strong relationships with students, they will find it easier to engage in a professional manner when dealing with student opinions or disagreements.

Teachers also need to be given time and space to properly reflect and sort through the things they learn in professional settings. Whether this be during their prep times, staff meetings or professional development days or discussions with school leaders, it is important that teachers know that certain times can be devoted to their own learning instead of other school-related tasks. During these times, teachers may also need to learn about global trends and current events to take their commitment to professional learning to the larger societal context and ensure relatable democratic discussions.

Understanding and Responding to the Larger Societal Context

As discussed, prioritizing democracy in the schools leads to continuous growth and change in the school environment. As new students and staff bring new ideas, changes, voices and commitments to their learning, schools must adapt to meet the needs of those students. As well, as the world changes and world events motivate new discussions, issues, global connections, and changes, schools need to address current events to make sure class discussions are relevant to students' lives and the larger societal context. Professional learning can aid this effort.

Supporting teachers in this effort means school leaders must allow time for teachers to adapt to necessary changes, as well as lead their staff through change initiatives in a positive manner. Change can be stressful and difficult. Some staff members may not want to prioritize change because they are happy with the way things are. However, change is a necessary part of educational democracy because it helps ensure learning is meaningful and connections are being made with students.

School leaders need to ensure that teachers understand the larger vision, or the why, of educational democracy. This allows teachers to feel more accepting of future changes that may

occur due to the everchanging notion of democracy. As Sinek (2011) believed, “Regardless of WHAT we do in our lives, our WHY our driving purpose, cause or belief never changes” (p. 136). Understanding the vision and mission of the schools’ commitment to educational democracy only means that only the content, or the what, will change: the why will always remain the same.

Conclusions

This capstone study focused on exploring the role democracy can play in junior high and high schools in Canada. Through the literature review it was determined that democracy can support student learning and engage students through their learning process. When students are active members of the learning process because they are using their voices, can make choices in the classroom and are connecting with the community and making connections between subjects, researchers have seen students become more engaged and take control of their own learning. This inspiring process also empowers students to make larger changes in the school community. Through whole-school initiatives that can be discussed in student councils, students can be motivated to be active citizens and learn about the democratic process.

Indigenous students and minority students still face racism in our schools and in society. The lack of cultural understanding, historical trauma, and lack of commitment to combating this problem can cause schools to unintentionally be unsafe environments for these students. With the support of democratic ideals, school staff can utilize voice, choice, exploration of the community and a more flexible curriculum to teach all students about cultural understanding and issues of racism in our society. Educational democracy has the power to help support teachers and school leaders to change and promote inclusivity in the school community.

Much like democratic governments, educational democracy cannot implement these positive changes immediately, permanently, or successfully without the reflection and continuous guidance of school leaders. Leaders need to ensure there is space in their schools to explore democracy by diminishing authoritarian control, understanding, and responding to the larger societal context, fostering effective relationships with staff and students, and having a deep understanding of democratic education. As staff and students change in a school and the outside community surrounding a school also changes, the school will need to continuously change to meet the needs of its students. This will be accomplished by listening and reflecting on the democratic process and will need to be led by school leaders.

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