The Long Walk with Democracy:
Democratic Teacher Narratives in Rural Appalachian Ohio

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This dissertation titled
The Long Walk with Democracy:
Democratic Teacher Narratives in Rural Appalachian Ohio

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This study examines a group of practicing K-12 teachers who were part of a grassroots teacher group called the Friday Roundtable. The narratives in this study represent the democratic educational experiences of eleven Roundtable teachers many of whom practice democratic education in rural Appalachian Ohio in spite of increased state and national pressures that often include undemocratic educational expectations. The teachers involved in the Friday Roundtable spent significant amounts of time trying to answer the collective question “How can we be better teachers?” Using individual case studies situated in both a Narrative Inquiry and Appreciative Inquiry design this research examines the democratic educational work of eleven of these K-12 teachers as they seek educational equity in their often underfunded Appalachian Ohio schools.

Among its conclusions this study found that most of the eleven Roundtable teachers interviewed had developed a democratic educational layer that was not easily penetrated by undemocratic ideas and educational practices. Ultimately this study brings to light the lasting impact a meaningful, focused, and democratic experience, such as the Friday Roundtable, can have on a group of teachers who are willing to allow the experience to help shape their teaching philosophy, practice and in some cases, life outlook. The undemocratic policies and practices described by the teachers in this study
are often the result of the undemocratic education practices coming from the state and national level including the latest high-stakes assessment pressures.

In its final turn this study is about a group of people who came together, many with an existing democratic leaning, and engaged in the hard work of any democracy: listing, arguing, debating, and reflecting on ideas as they defined and solidified their collective and individual democratic teaching philosophies. This solidification of democratic educational philosophy has served as an internalized core position for many of these teachers as they responded to, reacted against and at times resisted undemocratic practices and policies in their schools.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Jaylynne N. Hutchinson

Associate Professor of Educational Studies
DEDICATION

For Megan, my life partner,
I owe you more than I can ever repay.
I love you.

For Jonathan, your intelligence and kindness
remind me of the gifts we all hold.

For Adam, whose spirit and determination
continually inspired me to think about equity and justice.

For Jonah, a gentle soul with a smile that melts my heart.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background of the Study</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Framing the Study</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Significance of the Study</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimitations</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democracy Interpreted</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Complexity of an Idea</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Democratic Understandings</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedural Democracy</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Democracy</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Relationship: Education and Democracy</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY ......................................................................... 85

Introduction to the Methodology ........................................................................ 85

A Positive Foundation ......................................................................................... 87

The Researcher ..................................................................................................... 88

Participants .......................................................................................................... 89

   Snowball Sample ............................................................................................... 90

Procedures ............................................................................................................ 91

   Informed Consent .............................................................................................. 92

   Confidentiality .................................................................................................. 92

   Benefits ............................................................................................................. 93

Semi-Structured Interviews .................................................................................. 93

   Probes ............................................................................................................... 94

Data Analysis ........................................................................................................ 96

   Multiple Case Analysis ................................................................................... 96

CHAPTER FOUR: TEACHER VOICES, TEACHER NARRATIVES ....................... 98

Introduction ......................................................................................................... 98

Sally ....................................................................................................................... 101

   What is Democratic Education? ..................................................................... 101

   Idealism .......................................................................................................... 103

   I Quit Forever ................................................................................................. 106

   New Start: Be Kind to Kids, Trust Kids ......................................................... 107

   Own Your Experiences .................................................................................. 113

   The Test .......................................................................................................... 115
Friday Roundtables ................................................................................................. 286
I am Democratic ...................................................................................................... 287
Test Scores .............................................................................................................. 294
Appalachia .............................................................................................................. 296
What I Value About Myself as a Democratic Teacher ........................................... 297
My Hope for Democratic Educational Practice.................................................... 298

CHAPTER FIVE: THE ANALYSIS OF THE DATA................................................... 301

Introduction................................................................................................................. 301
Common Themes ........................................................................................................ 302
Cross-Case Analysis ................................................................................................... 303
Guided Observations and “Uncommon Utterances” ............................................... 305
Guided Observations ............................................................................................... 305
“Uncommon Utterances” ........................................................................................ 306

Guided Observation 1: A Steadfast Belief in Democracy and its Application to
Education .................................................................................................................... 306

Common Theme 2: Democratic Education Defined................................................. 308
Common Theme 4: The Self Values of these Democratic Educators ................. 312
Common Theme 3: The Roundtable and a Life of Democratic Teaching .......... 314

Guided Observation 2: A Deep Respect for Appalachia with Pragmatic
Understandings: Appreciations and Concerns ......................................................... 320

Common Theme 5: Democracy’s Promise of Social Justice in Rural Appalachia. 323

Guided Observation 3: A Resistance to Undemocratic Educational Practices: Educators
and the Test ................................................................................................................. 325
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Common Themes across the Individual Cases…………………………….304
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I think it is important to understand that the quality of the process you use to get to a place determines the ends, so when you want to build a democratic society, you have to act democratically in every way. If you want love and brotherhood, you’ve got to incorporate them as you go along, because you can’t just expect them to occur . . . A long-range goal for me is a direction that grows out of loving people, and caring for people, and believing in people’s capacity to govern themselves. (Myles Horton, 2003, p. XIII-XIV)

Background of the Study

This dissertation explores a specific understanding of democracy, a type of democracy that ensures the most fundamental component of any democracy: a democratically educated citizenry capable of “working with others in democratic relationships” (Mursell, 1955, p. 67). For James Mursell, this type of democracy is “do-democracy.” He notes that “do-democracy means actually working together with others in face-to-face relationships, dealing creatively with urgent and genuine problems in groups small enough for their members to have a real sense of togetherness and belonging” (p. 67). “Do-Democracy” is in opposition to what Mursell calls “talk-democracy,” which is characterized by people reaching a verbal agreement that the ideals of democracy (i.e., “freedom, equality, respect for personality”) are empty; “when it comes to action, to living, talk democracy is apt to mean very little” (p. 67).

One of the promises of democratic education is empowerment to act democratically. Hutchinson and Hunt (2000), note
Democratic education is an educational environment and pedagogy that allows students of every age to walk forward having strengthened the following three understandings: I can make a difference in my world, I know how to make a difference in my world and I care enough to make a difference in my world.

(p. 3)

For these scholars, the empowerment of students is the hallmark of democratic educational practice. However, the importance of an educated citizenry acting for the good of their communities is often not an aim of education in America’s schools.

Many scholars have argued that the health, utility and functionality of a democracy are significantly related to education (Apple & Beane, 1995; Childs, 1956; Dewey, 1916; Dewey, 1938; Giroux, 2003; Green, 1999, Horton, 1998, Hutchinson, 1999, Mursell, 1955; Romano & Glascock, 2002; Wood, 1992; Wood, 2005). This begs the question of what should compulsory education, an education that supports, sustains and ensures a vital democracy, look like in America? This question is not easily answered.

Within the educational community of researchers and practicing educators a heated debate rages about which elements lead to educational success (e.g., test scores, graduation rates, and employability). However, for a group of self identified democratic teachers working in rural Appalachian Ohio the answers to these questions have shaped their daily work for the majority of their careers. In many ways one of the questions before me as I put forward this work centers on the broad aims and purposes of education in the United States’ democratic society, “Can we, as a nation, be democratic without
teaching people the skills needed to act democratically?” While this is not my research question, it is a question with which educators in a democratic society should wrestle.

Research Questions

This dissertation explored the pedagogical practices, ideologies and democratic commitments of a group of educators who define themselves as democratic and or progressive teachers. This dissertation goes beyond a mere description of democratic practices in education to explore,

How and why these self identified democratic educators:

1. Maintain their commitment to democratic pedagogical practice in the face of political policies that call for the reduction of democracy in the classroom through centralized, standardized and predetermined outcome measures, and

2. Understand and define democratic education in their teaching practice in an underserved, under resourced and underrepresented population of students and families (generally working class and/or rural working poor people in Appalachian Ohio).

In other words, this study seeks to understand the following: “What can we more fully understand and appreciate about the experiences of democratic teachers working in rural Appalachian Ohio?”

Framing the Study

In this dissertation study I was not be interested in teachers who have recently graduated from a college teacher preparation program. This is about classroom teachers who have spent their career in the classroom. The teachers I was interested in understanding were not lured to administrative roles or pulled into full-time faculty
positions at institutions of higher education; they have remained in partnership with K-12 students every day, often for decades. The teachers I interviewed in this work have had the opportunity to answer the call to democratic education through their classroom practice and grassroots organization participation.

It is apparent to me that the teachers in this study have attempted to answer the following question, a question fundamental to the vitality of democratic life in the United States: Does democracy go around education or does education go around democracy? By this I mean, does American education, an education formally administered through America’s compulsory public schooling, either wrap itself in the foundations of democratic values or dodge democratic values through autocratic practices. The teachers in this study have responded in practice, through their work actions, regardless of changing political climates by employing a “democracy goes around education orientation.” As this study unfolds I hope that the importance of democracy and democratic actions enveloping education will become clearer.

William James (1907), a noted American philosopher writing at the turn of the twentieth century, illustrated the metaphysical dilemma inherit in the question, does democracy go around education or does education go around democracy? James wrote,

Some years ago, being with a camping party in the mountains, I returned from a solitary ramble to find every one engaged in a ferocious metaphysical dispute. The corpus of the dispute was a squirrel---a live squirrel supposed to be clinging to one side of a tree trunk; while over against the tree’s opposite side a human being was imagined to stand. This human witness tries to get sight of the squirrel by moving rapidly round the tree, but no matter how fast he goes, the squirrel
moves as fast in the opposite direction, and always keeps himself between the man, so that never a glimpse of him is caught. The resultant metaphysical problem now is this: Does the man go round the squirrel or not? He goes round the tree, sure enough, and the squirrel is on the tree: but does he go round the squirrel. (William James, p.141, in Castell, 1948)

I am confident that some will recoil at equating school to a metaphysical conundrum. I understand the initial readjustment of posture some will exhibit based on the physical reality of schooling; we can see buildings, hear teachers and students making busy, we can touch the books, pencils and papers that make schooling happen. However, from the beginning of our nation (the United States) the question “What is the purpose of school” has inspired venomous debates (Du Bois, 1898; Washington, 1900); Goodlad, 1994; Goodlad & McMannon, 1997), poor political decisions, and a general abdication of responsibility for the answer on the part of teachers, parents and the citizens of our democracy.

Within the scope of this dissertation it is not my purpose to fully explicate the most recent federal policy decision that moves America’s schools further from a democratic orientation (i.e., the “No Child Left Behind Act” or NCLB). However, this act ensures that many students experience “school” as a place where the measure of their success (i.e., high stakes individual test scores) dramatically outweigh becoming democratic citizens. Henry Giroux (2003), argues that those who determine the politics of education in America
are concerned less with [the] demands of equity, justice and social citizenship than with the imperatives of the marketplace, skill-based learning, and the needs of the individual consumer. (p. 76)

Giroux notes that in the “28-page educational plan, No Child Left Behind” the words “democracy and citizenship are virtually absent” (p. 76).

A perennial question seems to exist: “As a nation are we satisfied with pointing in the physical direction of schools and hoping that our future democracy is being nourished while not fully laboring over the question of what happens to students in our schools?” Schooling in America is like a puzzle whose pieces, misplaced, broken and dog-eared, do not fit together easily. Specifically, can the United States of America maintain a healthy democratic society without teaching and practicing democracy in our schools? Having studied democratic and pedagogical theory, I have an educated hunch that teachers who practice democratic education see schools as a place where democracy lives, is taught, and is experienced by students (at least in the space of their classrooms).

Returning to our metaphysical squirrel, William James answered the question “does the man go round the squirrel or not” by finding the location of what was being investigated. Specifically, he noted that the answer “depends on what you practically mean by going around the squirrel (p. 24).” By applying James’ argument to the question “does democracy go around education or does education go around democracy?” I have exchanged man and squirrel for education and democracy. I have explored in this work and now know that the teachers in this study understand that education and democracy cannot be torn from one another. These teachers have potentially wrapped the blanket of democratic educational practice around their classrooms and have offered their students
the opportunity to experience democracy. Before I offer an understanding of the
“important components of democracy” I will explore the implications of education going
around democracy.

Most citizens assume that schools in the United States (U.S.) are democratic
because they exist inside a democratic nation state. After all, the U.S. has free and open
elections that allow all citizens to vote. These elections ultimately result in the peaceful
transfer both of leaders and the power of being leaders. Displeasure with our elected
officials is voiced through a new election process that offers citizens the opportunity to
change the leaders. In addition, most schools in the U.S. have a student body government,
most offer courses on how the United States government is designed to function and
many schools offer students the opportunity to stop attending at a certain age.

However, it is clear in the work of multiple scholars that most schools do not
teach the habits of democracy (Childs, 1956; Dewey, 1916; Dewey, 1938; Finn, 1999;
Kohl, 1994; Kozol, 1992; Giroux, 2003; Hutchinson, 1999; Meier, 2002; Ohanian, 1999;
Shor, 1992; Wood, 1992; and Wood, 2005). In addition, most students in America’s
schools are not offered the opportunity to explore democracy, the very democracy that
should be lived through the actions of the citizens of their schools in their day to day
lived experiences. While it is true that most, if not all, high schools offer a class on civics,
they do not always offer the opportunity to live democratically in schools. In essence
learning about democracy is not the same as living democratically. John Goodlad (2001)
argues that schools must serve as a practicing place for citizens in our society to develop
the capacity to live democratically. He states,
If our society were inherently just, caring, hospitable to the diversity of its inhabitants, and neatly balanced in the interplay of freedom and authority—in other words, democratic—we would have less need to worry about the demise of public schools. But thoughtful people writing about education and democracy view the conditions of humankind as not inherently democratic and in dire need of the responsible moral stewardship that only a democratically educated polity can provide. (p. 12)

The work of this dissertation was to better understand those teachers who are working to educate for a “democratically educated polity” (p. 12).

Statement of the Problem

Numerous scholars have written about the common place, the everyday, the accidental and marginalizing experiences of so many students in America’s schools (Anyon, 1980; Finn, 1999; Freire, 1970; Gatto, 2002; Greene, 1995; Goodlad, 1994; Horton, 1998; Hutchinson, 1999; Kohn, 2004; Kohn, 2000; Kohn, 1996; Kohl, 1994; Kozol, 1992; Romano & Glascock, 2002). According to these researchers, too many of our children find themselves in traditional autocratic classrooms with teachers who either do not understand the educative potential of democratic educational practice or who consciously choose not to make this their pedagogical philosophy. Additionally, students and many teachers feel the pressure of misplaced educational reforms (e.g., “No Child Left Behind”) and report after report provides teacher testimony about how their teaching and students’ learning is harmed by the standardization and high stakes testing imposed on local schools, teachers and students (Kohn, 2004; Meier, 2002; Meier & Woods 2004; Nichols & Berliner, 2008; Poetter, Wegwert & Haerr, 2006; Ohanian, 1999). For
example, George Wood (2004) writes about an Ohio teacher’s frustration at being expected to teach reading through following a set “script” (p. 39). The teacher in Wood’s example stated,

   I am to point to a letter in a word, say, for example, “not.” The script tells me to point to the first letter and sing out “ready, what sound?” Then I point to one of the children who is to give me the “n” sound. I am to repeat this with each letter, then say “Ready, what word?” as I glide my finger under the entire word the children are to miraculously put the sounds together and read. (p. 39)

Wood adds that the teacher is explaining this “scripted” process, known formally as “direct instruction” from a 200 page book that contains each lesson from which there is not to be deviation (p. 39). Wood calls this practice “instructional destruction” (p.39).

Not only do the current educational policies harm democratic education, but the current process of formal teacher preparation restricts the development of democratic values in our nation’s pre-service teachers. Specifically, Ira Shor (1992) wrote:

   The teacher plays a key role in the critical classroom. Student participation and positive emotions are influenced by the teacher’s commitment to both. One limit to this commitment comes from the teacher’s development in traditional schools where passive, competitive and authoritarian methods dominate. (p.26)

Based on my course work, I am amazed that a small group of dedicated teachers in rural Appalachian Ohio managed to engage in the practice of democratic education, especially in schools that often support autocratic methods (Anyon 1980: Finn 1999; Kozol, 1992; Willis, 1977). It was this amazement that fueled my desire to ensure their stories were not
lost either to time or the more dominate undemocratic structures that exemplify much of American public education today.

A passive, competitive and authoritarian classroom is no place for contagious democracy and it cannot prepare children with the skills needed for democratic citizenship. Apple and Beane (1995) quoting James Mursell, remind us how harmful suppressing democratic participation in schools can be:

If the schools of a democratic society do not exist for the support and extension of democracy, then they are either socially useless or socially dangerous. At best they will educate people who will go their way and earn a living indifferent to the obligations of citizenship in particular and of the democratic way of life in general—But likely they will educate people to be enemies of democracy—people who will fall prey to demagogues, and who back movements and rally round leaders hostile to the democratic way of life. Such schools are either futile or subversive. They have not legitimate reason for existence. (Apple & Beane, p. 23)

Mursell (1955) continues the argument that education in a democratic society demands that schools function to “support and extend democracy,” he demands that schools rise to this essential task. He writes,

There is only one honest purpose for education in a democratic society, and that is to support and extend democracy. Moreover, education must fulfill this purpose not in word alone, but also in deed . . . Democratic education is education that is expressly planned and conducted to support, perpetuate, enlarge and strengthen
the democratic way of life, and all its practical operations are determined by this purpose. (p. 4)

It is evident that the teachers I interviewed understood the fundamental importance that democratic educational participation makes in the lives of those offered the opportunity to experience this type of learning. Based on this work, I understand that there is a deep commitment to democracy on the part of most of the teachers I interviewed. I am fascinated by what I perceive to be these teachers’ continued desire to educate students from a life-giving democratic place or what Freire (1970) might call the biophilic force of authentic education (p. 77). This is especially challenging while working inside the landscape of expected conformity to the explicit mandates of imposed educational structures designed to meet the administrative realities of our current high stakes testing culture.

Additionally, I have wondered about the commitment and potentially unwavering drive held by these democratic educators over the “long haul.” I use the term “long haul” in the Myles Horton (1998) sense of shaping a career, a lifetime of work around certain democratic ideas, regardless of the political or societal implications. As I have studied the tensions that exist between democratic educational praxis and more traditional authoritarian educational practice I have searched for a collection of work dedicated to the experiences of democratic classroom teachers in the rural Appalachian context; I have found none.

The work of democratically oriented schools is more easily found in the literature (Apple & Beane, 1995; Lightfoot, 1983; Meier, 1995; Rose, 1995; Smolitz, 2001; Wood, 1992; Wood, 2005). However, in this work I did not desire to explore a school or a
system of schools, but rather individual teachers. Being interested in democratic teachers I wanted to understand the professional and personal career narratives of self identified democratic teachers as they have, over the course of their individual careers, maintained a “long walk with democracy” in their rural Appalachian Ohio classrooms.

The Significance of the Study

Democratic education has been examined from the perspective and experience of democratic schools (Apple & Beane, 1995; Lightfoot, 1983; Meier, 1995; Rose, 1995; Smolitz, 2001; Wood, 1992; Wood, 2005). The work of these scholars is important in relation to the development of a macro level understanding of democratic education, especially when the resources of an entire school are dedicated to a democratic approach. Jaylynne Hutchinson (2008) notes that it is important to understand “that schools are not either/or as it comes to democratic educational practice.” For her, democratic schools and democratic educational practice exists on a continuum. This continuum ranges from “radically democratic schools to schools that have a single teacher in one classroom only able to put into play one democratic practice such as weekly class meetings or developing class rules together (J.N. Hutchinson, personal communication, December 16, 2008).

In addition, several scholars have written about students languishing in undemocratic, poorly funded and uninspired schools (Delpit, 1995; Kohl, 1994; Kozol, 1992; Sidorkin, 2002). When viewed in conjunction with the lack of literature centering on democratic teachers who, I believe, are often working in less than democratic schools the body of scholarship is lacking, particularly in the rural context. In addition, to the best of my knowledge, little literature exists related to the democratic development of teachers
over the course of their teaching careers exists. This study adds additional insight, especially for teacher educators who choose to prepare democratic educators.

The significance of this study lies in its ability to understand a career long dedication to democratic praxis by teachers who in the face of significant challenges remained democratic. This study offers a unique understanding of the triumphs, disappointments, steadfastness and, at times, the messy nature of democracy as practiced by dedicated teachers in the rural classrooms of Appalachian Ohio. Overall, the narratives I collected for this study came from a group of democratic teachers who understand and practice democratic education. I firmly believe that their dedication to democracy represents the strength of will some teachers hold that turn their beliefs into meaningful educational action and nods in the direction of what American public education should strive to become.

Another important element of this study is its geographical location. The teachers in this study work largely in rural Ohio Appalachian schools. The schools these teachers work in are poorly funded due to Ohio’s unconstitutional school funding practices (Ohio Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Finding, 2007). In addition, students often find themselves in the middle of undue discrimination based on stereotypes formulated about Appalachian people and the seemingly indifference of the state of Ohio to fund their public schools equitably in order to provide an equal education for all its citizens.

At its core, potential findings for this study could inform the everyday practice of teachers who are interested in understanding democratic educational practice. In addition, this study could be of interest to scholars in the area of Appalachian Studies. Specifically,
this interest may be due to the underwhelming nature of the educational literature addressing this specific area.

Limitations

The limitations of this work include the following:

1. The teacher narratives in this work are from self-defined democratic teachers who came together as a grassroots group at a certain time, in a certain place and decided to support each other’s work. It is beyond the scope of this work to try to know all educators who self define as democratic or progressive teachers. There are some teachers who practice all or some aspects of democratic education who may not realize they might be defined as such.

2. Asking people to remember their life over a ten, twenty or thirty year span presents a unique limitation. Specifically, stories and life narratives are not static, but are continually developing. Narratives change over time through retelling and reflection. A limitation of narrative is its unique ability to capture human thought and stories, including our missteps and imperfections. What is told in a narrative is a snapshot of a past, reflected upon in the retelling (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber, 1998).

3. This study is limited by a lack of literature on the topic. Much has been written about democratic education with a particular interest in democratic schools. However, little scholarship exists on the subject of democratic teacher’s career stories. This is especially true when looking at a career long dedication to democratic educational practice on the part of these educators.
Delimitations

Several important delimitations are present in this work including: geographical location, the type of teachers interviewed, the choice of methodology, the specific employment of the methods and by the selection of a specific group of people involved in the K-12 education process. In this section I will discuss each of these delimitations in relation to their impact on this research project.

1. This research is geographically located in Appalachian Ohio. Regarding his book, “Appalachia on our Mind” Henry Shapiro (1978) wrote,

“This is not a history of Appalachia. It is a history of the idea of Appalachia, and hence of the invention of Appalachia. It attempts to examine the origins and consequences of the idea that the mountainous portions of eight or nine southern states form a coherent region inhabited by an homogeneous population possessing a uniform culture” (p.ix).

Shaprio’s words remind me of the importance of not over generalizing the distinctiveness of Appalachia. In this study I have chosen to understand the life work of democratic teachers working in rural Appalachian Ohio without over generalizing the Appalachian context.

2. Also, not all rural education contains the unique set of characteristics found in Appalachia. Rural education in the cornfields of Iowa or Nebraska for example, may not have the same dilemmas as found in rural Appalachia.

3. I believe that most teachers in America work hard in schools every day. I also believe that most teachers work to help children. However, in the scope of this project I cannot investigate the careers of all teachers. I have limited this work to
those teachers who self identify as democratic or progressive. This delimitation is crucial to this study because it bounds the project and allows me to understand the life work of a number of teachers in an effort to bring a pragmatic understanding to the topic.

4. I have selected a qualitative narrative methodology. The ability to study a person’s life history requires an in-depth understanding of their unique life experience. Specifically, I have decided to use semi-structured qualitative interviews to help elicit these narratives rather than choosing large sampling methods via quantitative methods. It is not my intention to develop large generalizeable conclusions, but rather to more fully understand the experiences of a number of democratic educators who spent the majority of their careers in dedication to democratic education.

5. Schools include parents, teachers, administrators and students. Due to the constraints of time and scope I limited this study to teachers. I recognize the value that “voices” of parents, students and administrators offer when trying to understand democratic education. An inquiry that includes the voices of those not heard in this study could be conducted at a later date.

Definition of Terms

1. *Appalachia*: Richard A. Couto (2002) offers a definition of Appalachia related to the Appalachian Regional Commission. His definition is useful because if helps understand the contextual nature of Appalachia. He writes,

   In 1965, the Appalachian Regional Development Act, which created the Appalachian Regional Commission, drew the boundaries of the region . . .
These boundaries, the most expansive to date, have become widely accepted. They follow the spine of the Appalachian Mountains from the southern tier of New York counties to a tier of northeast Mississippi counties. The region encompasses 406 counties and 13 states, including all of West Virginia and portions of Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. (pp. 3-4)

Couto’s definition when coupled with the Appalachian Regional Commissions definition of Appalachia will serve as this study’s primary definition of Appalachia. Currently the ARC states that:

Appalachia, as defined in the legislation from which the Appalachian Regional Commission derives its authority, is a 200,000-square-mile region that follows the spine of the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northern Mississippi. It includes all of West Virginia and parts of 12 other states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. About 23 million people live in the 410 counties of the Appalachian Region; 42 percent of the Region's population is rural, compared with 20 percent of the national population. The Region's economic fortunes were based in the past mostly on extraction of natural resources and manufacturing. The modern economy of the Region is gradually diversifying, with a heavier emphasis on services and widespread development of tourism, especially in more remote areas
where there is no other viable industry. Coal remains an important resource, but it is not a major provider of jobs. Manufacturing is still an economic mainstay but is no longer concentrated in a few major industries. (See appendix A)

It is important to this study that I list the twenty-nine federally recognized Appalachian counties in Ohio they are: Adams, Athens, Belmont, Brown, Carroll, Clermont, Columbiana, Coshocton, Gallia, Guernsey, Harrison, Highland, Hocking, Holmes, Jackson, Jefferson, Lawrence, Meigs, Monroe, Morgan, Muskingum, Noble, Perry, Pike, Ross, Scioto, Tuscarawas, Vinton, and Washington (The Appalachian Region Commission, 2007).

2. Democratic education: A democratic classroom orientation is one where teachers facilitate student participation, ideas and experiences as a central component of the educational process. It has been argued that a robust democracy requires an educated citizenry. Education for democracy would require providing opportunities for students to practice democratic skills, values and attitudes. Hence, at a minimum democratic education would provide students learning opportunities including, but not limited to: hands on projects, community connections, meaningful student governance, opportunities to develop personal relationships, conflict resolution skills, relevant curriculum, commitment to diversity, and thematic teaching.

3. Democracy: As used in this dissertation, democracy goes beyond the “thin” description of our basic structural and governmental democracy (representative legislature, the three branches of government, election, etc.). Rather it focuses on
a “thick” notion of democracy meaning those characteristics and skills that citizens need in order to become fully participatory members of their democratic society. For Judith Green (1999), this is a “deep democracy” which she explains in the following manner,

Deep democracy so understood—as a realistically imaginative philosophical expansion of the implications of the democratic ideal into habits of the heart and a shared way of life—is profoundly preferable to a merely formal, institutional conception of democracy because it is preferable ‘all the way down.’ Deep democracy can guide the development of characters with socially conscious responsible agency, as well as the emergence of a more sensitive awareness of each individual’s gifts, and needs, and a fuller realization of our most valuable human potentials” (1999, page xiv).

For the purposes of this work I will rely on Green’s description of democracy.

4. Progressive Education: For the purposes of this study I will use progressive education interchangeably with democratic education. While some may argue that these two terms are not completely interchangeable, “Progressive education” was the moniker first given to John Dewey’s conception of the role of education in a democracy (see John Dewey’s 1916 work: Democracy and Education).

5. Narrative inquiry: Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) offer an understanding of narrative inquiry and its role in the collection of qualitative data, People are storytellers by nature. Stories provide coherence and continuity to one’s experience and have a central role in our communication with
others…stories imitate life and present an inner reality to the outside world; at the same time however, they shape and construct the narrator’s personality and reality…the story is one’s identity, a story created, told, revised, and retold throughout life. We know or discover ourselves, and reveal ourselves to others by the stories we tell. (p. 7)

In this research, narrative inquiry will refer to the telling of our experiences and the meaning we give to our experiences.

6. *America*: Throughout this dissertation I use the terms the “United States” and “America” interchangeably in reference to the United States of America. I am aware that by using the term “America” I will, deservedly, invite criticism for the presumptuousness of taking a continent’s name and claiming it for a single nation. However, I will use the term because it has a generalized and accepted meaning, as is apparent in the literature.

7. *High Stakes Testing*: In this study I use this term in reference to the use of a single test as the primary measurement used to determine the success of students, teachers and schools. Often this measurement is attached to serious consequences or ‘high stakes” when students fail to meet arbitrarily determined standards of success (e.g., the withholding of graduation and teacher merit pay, the classification of a school as underperforming or academically inadequate).
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Where democracy has fallen it was too exclusively political in nature. It had not become part of the bone and blood of people in daily conduct. Democratic life forms were limited to Parliament, elections and combats between parties . . . unless democratic habits of thought and action are part of the fiber of people, political democracy is insecure. It cannot stand in isolation. It must be buttressed by the presence of democratic methods in all social relationships. (Dewey, 1939, pp. 720-721)

Introduction

In this chapter I will review several themes related to democracy, education and democratic participation. For the purpose of this study I will explore two broad theories of democracy: procedural democracy and social democracy. I will then review the relationships between education and democracy because it is this relationship that forms the hinge pin of this study. Specifically, in this literature review I will explicate the pertinent literature related to democracy for citizenship, the relational elements of democracy in education and describe several documented places of democratic educational practice and teaching. In addition I will review the literature related to teaching in underserved population, specifically the rural Appalachian context in South Eastern Ohio. With respect to the latter two sections special attention will be given to a specific case of stereotyping inside an Appalachian school district. Finally, this chapter will include a review of the relevant literature regarding the qualitative research, including narrative inquiry and appreciative inquiry.
Democracy Interpreted

In the opening of this chapter, John Dewey (1939), one of the early intellectual advocates and promoters of democratic education, made an argument that for democracy to flourish it “must be buttressed by the presence of democratic methods in all social relationships (p. 721). This idea is one of the primary foci of this section of the literature review. Specifically, this section will discuss two types of democracy: Procedural and Social.

Before I enter into this section of the literature review it is necessary to note that democracy has been defined, understood and applied (especially in the area of education) in numerous ways by different scholars. For example, Kelly, (1995) offers a philosophical understanding of democracy; Soder (1997) & Goodlad, & McMannon (1997), argue that democracy hinges on morality and its development in the young; Parker (2003), explains that democracy’s greatest promise is one of social justice; others offer insightful and important arguments related to the positive possibilities that the democratic ethos could have on society, (Counts, 1932, Dewey, 1916, Green, 1999; Mursell, 1955; Novak, 1994; Weiner, 2005; West, 2004). A vast amount of literature exists in the area of democracy, and democracy in education. This reality required me to be selective in the literature reviewed in relation to the limited scope of this research proposal. As a result, I attempted to find literature that both informed this study’s development and will aide in the future analysis of the data.

Also, I did not seek or utilize literature that would reduce the interpretations, definitions, understandings or arguments about democracy to the simple state of consensus. Mursell (1955) argues that “it is a mistake to confuse democracy itself with
certain procedures…many people tend to think that democracy is the same thing as majority rule. This is not true” (p. 65). For him the democratic ethos is not found in the final act of decision making, but in the process of how a decision is reached. Specifically, in regards to leaders and leadership in schools Mursell writes that “it is very right and proper for a group of pupils to think seriously and carefully about what topic, or project or unit might well be undertaken” and the teacher or the leader in this situation “should encourage” such discussion (p.66). He continues arguing that the teacher, should do [his or her] best to point the discussion up, to make it fruitful, meaningful, careful, responsible. [The teacher] should guide the thinking of the group and be guided by it. But when it comes to making a decision, [the teacher] has no business to delegate [his or her] authority to a majority of the group. What [the teacher] must do is exercise that authority in the name of the group, and as an expression of its thinking. In such cases, this is true democratic practice. (pp. 67)

It is with this basic understanding of democracy, specifically, that democracy is not a consensus process or majority rule mandate, but an interaction of equal individuals, their ideas and voices working to understand or act on their world that will help guide this literature review.

As stated earlier a complete explication of all democratic theory is beyond the scope of this dissertation proposal. Therefore, this review will briefly introduce and discuss procedural democracy in an effort to illustrate its place in American mainstream thinking about democracy. This literature review will then shift to the concept of social democracy. For the purposes of this study, it is the concept of social democracy that strongly influence the principles of democratic education, because it is the social
democracy that offers our best hope for revitalizing our educational system and strengthening democratic participation by students who will become citizens.

The Complexity of an Idea

The notion of separate interpretations or ideas existing within one larger concept is demonstrated in the documents of the United Nations, offering important insights into the distinctions between procedural and social democracy. The United Nations (UN) Agreement of Human Rights (1966) which is also known as the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” offers two distinct “covenants” regarding human rights: the “Covenant on Civil and Political Rights” and the “Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights” (retrieved 2007, pp. 1-5). For the purpose of this work the aforementioned is similar to what I will call a procedural democracy and the later is similar to what I will call social democracy.

The “Covenant on Civil and Political Rights” contains 6 parts and 53 separate articles with numerous points under each article all outlining the basic individual rights of people under the rule of law (2007, pp. 1-2). Among these “Civil and Political Rights” are:

- The right to be recognized as a person before the law
- The right to equality before the law
- The right to liberty and free movement

The individual nature of these rights coupled with a legal procedure by which to ensure they are enforced is in contrast to the “Economic, Social and Cultural Rights” offered to a larger society.
The “Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights” contains 5 parts and 31 articles. These articles deal with community responsibility (p. 1). Examples of these articles include,

- Free primary education and accessible education and all levels
- Wages sufficient to support a minimum standard of living

These articles are written to help offer stability in the social aspects of societies. Specially, the United Nations notes that under the umbrella of the “International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights” that the,

ideal of free human beings enjoying freedom from fear and want can only be achieved if conditions are created whereby everyone may enjoy his economic, social and cultural rights, as well as his civil and political rights and freedoms.

The United Nations observed that “Human Rights” included not only the rights of citizenship under the law, but also the economic, social and cultural rights that allow a person to function as a citizen in a given society.

Two Democratic Understandings

_Procedural Democracy_

As I enter into a brief review of “Procedural Democracy” I was reminded of the “Schoolhouse Rock” videos of the 1970’s and 1980’s. These cartoons introduced many U.S. children to the concepts related to the structure and functioning of the United States government, one of these cartoons was entitled, “Three Ring Government.” In this video the basic elements of the United States “procedural” democratic process was explained.
The poem is as follows:

Three Ring Government

Gonna have a three-ring circus someday,
People will say it's a fine one, son.
Gonna have a three-ring circus someday,
People will come from miles around.
Lions, tigers, acrobats, and jugglers and clowns galore,
Tightrope walkers, pony rides, elephants, and so much more...

Guess I got the idea right here at school.
Felt like a fool when they called my name,
Talkin' about the government and how it's arranged,
Divided in three like a circus.
Ring one, Executive,
Two is Legislative, that's Congress.
Ring three, Judiciary.
See it's kind of like my circus, circus. . .

(Schoolhouse Rock, 1979).

The idea that democracy is primarily a process of the three structural components of governments and politics is central to the tenets of “Procedural Democracy.” However for the purposes of this dissertation “Procedural Democracy” is not just the thin veneer of democracy found in democratic political elections or the democratic leadership of the three branches of the United States government. For the purposes of this work the ideas associated with procedural democracy are much more toxic to the tenants of citizenship and equity.

Several scholars have argued that a formal or procedural democracy functions to limit participation (Green, 1999; Grugel, 2002; Schumpeter, 1950). Green (1999) notes that,

In recent years, an odd international alliance of conservative and liberal political theorists has advocated a purely formal, institutional conception of democracy for
very different reasons: as an expression of a filial piety to America’s Founding Fathers, or as the most extensive conception of democracy compatible with individualistically conceived liberty, or in the belief that no shared conception of the goods or goals of social life can be justified. (p. vi)

For Green the avocation of a “purely formal” concept of democracy is problematic in relation to a “deeper conception of democracy that expresses the experience-based possibility of more equal, respectful and mutually beneficial ways of community life” (p. iv).

Green’s reference to an “odd international alliance of conservative and liberal political theorists” is expanded by another scholar who explores the rational for such advocating. Grugel (2003) explains that in the mid 1940’s “liberal democracy was no longer seen as one strand of democracy: it was presented as the only version” (p. 17). For Grugel liberal democracy “was more and more equated with the political arrangements for government and, more generally, the empirical ‘reality’ of the west” (p. 17).

The dilemma of this interpretation of democracy, a procedural interpretation, can be found in the work of Joseph Schumpeter (1976) who wrote that,

According to the view we have taken, democracy does not mean and cannot mean that the people actually rule in any obvious sense of the term “people” and “rule”. Democracy means only that people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them. (pp. 284-285)

It was this type of democracy, a formal or procedural democracy, that concerned Thomas Jefferson.
For Jefferson governmental power was at the center of his argument for an educated citizenry. In a letter to George Washington he wrote,

> It is an axiom in my mind that our liberty can never be safe but in the hands of the people themselves, and that, too, of the people with a certain degree of instruction. This is the business of the state to effect, and on a general plan . . . I do most anxiously wish to see the highest degree of education given to the higher degrees of genius and to all degrees of it, so much as may enable them to read and understand what is going on in the world and keep their part of it going on right. (Honeywell, 1931, p.13)

For Jefferson, an educated citizenry functioned in a democratic system to ensure that the leaders of that system did not skew the resources of the state in the direction of their own interests. He wrote,

> I have indeed two great measures at heart without which no republic can maintain itself in strength. 1. That of general education to enable every [person] to judge for himself what will secure or endanger [their] freedom. 2. To divide every county into hundreds of such size that all the children of each will be within reach of a central school in it. (p. 13)

Jefferson understood that for a democracy to be of the people, the people needed an education that developed within them the ideas and understandings of democratic participation.

**Social Democracy**

As used in this study social democracy goes beyond the “thin” description of procedural democracy (e.g., representative legislature, the three branches of government,
elections, etc.). Rather it focuses on a “deep” notion of democracy meaning those characteristics that citizens need to become fully participatory members of their democratic society. For Judith Green (1999) this is a “deep democracy” that she explains in the following manner,

Deep democracy so understood—as a realistically imaginative philosophical expansion of the implications of the democratic ideal into habits of the heart and a shared way of life—is profoundly preferable to a merely formal, institutional conception of democracy because it is preferable ‘all the way down.’ Deep democracy can guide the development of characters with socially conscious responsible agency, as well as the emergence of a more sensitive awareness of each individual’s gifts, and needs, and a fuller realization of our most valuable human potentials. (p. xiv)

For the purposes of this work I will rely on Green’s description of democracy because she offers a solid argument against the limiting nature of democracy as described by Joseph Schumpeter and she aligns her concept of democracy closely with the work of Dewey (1939) in relation to education.

Dewey’s (1939) observation that “unless democratic habits of thought and action are part of the fiber of people, political democracy is insecure” (p. 721) is of central importance in my understanding of how democracy can operate in American society. His notion of “insecurity” can be viewed as democracy lacking the “social” interpretation and internalization of democracy by the people of that democratic society. Cornel West (2003) would describe this as a “Cultural Way of Being” (p. 68).
For West (2004) democracy is about empowerment and participation. West explains:

Democracy is always a movement of an energized public to make elites responsible—it is at its core and most basic foundation the taking back of one’s power in the face of misuse of elite power. In this sense, democracy is more a verb than a noun—it is more a dynamic striving and collective movement that a static order or stationary status quo. Democracy is not just a system of governance, as we tend to think of it, but a cultural way of being. (p. 68)

Democracy as a “cultural way of being” demands a faith in the “social” nature of democracy that moves it beyond the procedural and into the “bone and blood of the people.” (Dewey, 1939, 720)

James Mursell (1955) discusses democracy as an ethical faith and he offers several important points that further Green’s and West’s thoughts on democracy. Mursell writes,

*Democracy is based on faith.* It is based on faith in man, and in his essential reasonableness and goodness. It is based on faith that if people are honestly and devotedly helped to understand issues and problems of life, they will be able to achieve understanding; and this if they achieve understanding, they will act on it . . . No, one can prove that his faith is justified, If it could be proved, it would cease to be faith. All we can say is that there is nothing to refute it, and that when the democratic ethic is honestly and adequately put to the test, its workableness is demonstrated. (italics his, pp. 25-26)
A faith in the people to be active, participatory and responsible is at the core of a social understanding of democracy. These concepts of social democracy will help focus this proposal in relation to the importance of education and its role in the development of deeply democratic citizens.

A Relationship: Education and Democracy

In this section I will review the literature that addresses the ideas and concepts related to the relationship between democracy and education as it is these ideas that help form what is called democratic education. This section of the literature review is divided into the following areas “Democracy Needs Democratic Education” and “Democratic Education.”

Democracy Needs Democratic Education

Several scholars have argued that democratic education serves to ensure a democratic society exists by providing students with the everyday experiences of living democratically (Apple & Beane, 1995; Counts, 1939; Dewey, 1916; Goodlad, 1996; Kelly, 1995; Ligon, 2005, Mursell, 1955; Parker, 2003; Sehr, 1997). For Mursell (1955) schools can have a profound impact on the development of a democratic way of life. He writes,

Our schools can make it their chief business, year by year, generation by generation, to promote and uphold democracy in American life. They can deliberately set to work to develop men and women who wholeheartedly accept the democratic ethic, and who are capable of solving the problems of its application. (p. 52)
Mursell argues that democratic education serves the greater good of developing
democratic citizens. For him democratic education includes teaching the young to “bring
reason to bear on all circumstances of living, to bow only and always to the demands of
conscience, to exercise freedom by being worthy of it, to treat all men as brothers”
(p. 52).

Soder (1997) argues that citizens in a democracy must have the skills to govern
themselves and the attitude that they are capable of that act. He writes,

Citizens in a democracy must have a strong sense of their rights and what they
should expect from their leaders. They must have a strong sense of the
fundamental notions of the democratic political process, including notions of
equality, fairness, and due process, and, in the United States, a separation of
powers and an independent judiciary. And they must believe that they themselves
are, with appropriate preparation, fully capable of governing themselves well.
(p. 93)

Soder’s argument offers strength to the notion that democracy needs democratic
education.

Kelly (1995) writes that education cannot exist in isolation from the practices of a
political life on the part of citizens. Rather, she argues that

In a democracy no political life is possible without a solid theory of education and
an abiding commitment to the implementation and maintenance of practices
informed by democratic ideals. (p. 14)
It is with an ear toward Soder’s and Kelly’s words that this literature review now turns to democratic education and an explication of two important components of democratic education: educational relationships and social justice.

**Democratic Education**

Based on the work of John Dewey (1938) it is important for me to offer a working understanding of the foundations of democratic education and in many ways democratic life. By this I mean an understanding that will serve as a guide for understanding the practice of the democratic teachers found in this study. For Dewey the juxtaposition of democratic and non-democratic educational practice stands as a powerful way to describe democratic education. Dewey noted that “If one attempts to formulate the philosophy of education implicit in the practices of new education, we may, I think discover certain common principles amid the variety of progressive schools now existing” (p. 19). In other words, Dewey observed that common threads or characteristics of democratic educational practice existed in schools claiming the progressive title.

Specifically, Dewey (1938) articulated several characteristics of democratic education. Dewey’s words help to flavor the definition of democratic education throughout this dissertation. Dewey described democratic education by contrasting what democratic education is not with what democratic education strives to offer students. He wrote,

> We may, I think, discover certain common principles amid the variety of progressive schools now existing. To imposition from above is opposed expression and cultivation of individuality; to external discipline is opposed free activity; to learning from texts and teachers, learning through experience; to
acquisition of isolated skills and techniques by drill, is opposed acquisition of them as a means of attaining ends which make direct vital appeal; to preparation for a more or less remote future is opposed making the most of the opportunities of present life; to static aims and materials is opposed acquaintance with a changing world. (pp. 19-20)

Hence, Dewey includes these six characteristics as significant principles of what is meant by progressive or democratic education: the celebration of expression and cultivation of individuality, inspired free activity, learning through experience, the acquisition of skills and techniques by means which make direct vital appeal, the utilization of the opportunities of present life for educational exploration and becoming acquainted with a changing world (pp. 19-20).

Dewey (1938) noted that these principles “by themselves are abstract” (p. 20). He cautioned that the interpretation and application of these ideas are immensely important. For Dewey the “danger in a new movement” especially one that was “rejecting the aims and methods” of an old system is that it might “develop its principles negatively rather that positively and constructively” (p. 20).

When coupled with the work of Apple and Beane (1995) a more complete understanding of basic values and concepts of democratic education comes forward. Apple and Beane identified seven conditions that form “the foundations of the democratic way of life” (pp.6-7). These foundational elements are listed in their words:

1. The open flow of ideas, regardless of the popularity, that enables people to be as fully formed as possible.
2. Faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities of resolving problems.

3. The use of critical reflection and analysis to evaluate ideas, problems and policies.

4. Concern for the welfare of others and the “common good.”

5. Concern for the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities.

6. An understanding that democracy is not so much an “ideal” to be pursued as an “idealized” set of values that we live and that must guide our life as a people.

7. The organization of social institutions to promote and extend the democratic way of life.

Apple and Beane continue their argument reflecting the idea of John Dewey (1916), “If people are to secure and maintain a democratic way of life, they must have opportunities to learn what that way of life means and how it might be lead” (p. 7). For these authors the truth of these statements is grounded in common sense; however, they note that the idea of democratic schools is the most “problematic concept in education” (p.7). Apple and Beane note that many people see democracy as “nothing more than a form of federal government” and as a result they do not think democracy applies to schools (p.7). In addition these authors state that for many people “democracy is a right of adults, not the young” (p. 7).
Two Components of Democratic Education

Educational Relationships

One of the tenants of democratic education articulated by John Dewey (1916) was that “Democratic education is not just learning from texts and teachers but pursues learning through experience” (p. 19). The idea of learning by experience implies that the teacher and learner enter into a relationship that allows the student to become more than a passive receiver of knowledge.

For Mursell (1955), relationships are an important element in a democracy. He wrote that,

Face-to-face relationships and dealings are the mainspring of democracy. People learn the democratic ethic by actually working with others in democratic relationships, or they are not likely to learn that ethic effectively at all. (Mursell, 1955, p. 67)

For him it is the practice of being in a democratic relationship with others that helps teach people how to be democratic. Mursell argues that relationships in schools create a central space where this happens.

Biesta (2004) argues that there is a relational space he identifies as the “gap” (p. 12). For Biesta the question of “where does education take place?” asks teachers to explore the educational relationship they have with students. For him it is the communication between students and teachers, or the relationship, which is the vital measure of education. Specifically, he notes, that education is a complex interaction “between the (activities of the) educator and the (activities of the) one being educated” (p. 12). He also notes that “we should take the idea that education consists of the
interaction between the teacher and the learner absolutely seriously” because “it follows
that education is located not in the activities of the teacher, nor in the activities of the
learner, but in the interaction between the two” (pp.12-13). For Biesta, “Education, in
other words, takes place in the gap between the teacher and the learner” (p. 13).
Democratic education needs the space or “gap” created by the student-teacher
relationship in order to fully find the “faith in the individual and collective capacity of
people to create possibilities of resolving problems” (Apple & Beane, 1995, p. 7).

In Biesta’s “gap” democratic education becomes possible when “teachers can
acknowledge the existence of the gap as a space of enunciation that is brought onto
existence only as a result of the common effort of teachers and learners, a space that
exists only in communication” (p. 21). In the educational practice or pedagogy, the
teacher needs to first understand the tremendous potential of educational relationships.

Other scholars have described a “pedagogy of relations” in education (Bingham &
Sidorkin, 2004; Hutchinson, 2004; Romano, 2004). A foundational element found in the
“Pedagogy of Relations” is that “teaching is building educational relations. Aims of
teaching and outcomes of learning can both be defined as specific forms of relations to
oneself, people around the students, and the larger world” (Bingham and Sidorkin, p. 7).
This expectation fits well with Mursell’s (1955) observation that “Face-to-face
relationships and dealings are the mainspring of democracy” (p. 67). The notion of face-
to-face relations in a democracy and democratic teaching existing inside educational
relationships begs the question: “how can teachers enter it a democratic educational
relationship with students, who are in many ways strangers?”
It appears that teachers will be unable to enter into a true democratic relationship with their students if they teach from a place of passive, competitive and authoritarian methods instead of “the gap” as described earlier by Biesta. For Romano, a relational pedagogy includes teachers developing a different type of literacy, a literacy that reads students so that teachers might keep in touch with who their students are, so they might be responsive, and be conscious of those teachable moments that can unpredictably appear as quickly as they can disappear if a teacher remains unaware of them. (pp. 153-154)

Romano argues that it is the relational elements of teaching that are often not formally offered to teachers in their preparatory programs (p. 155). For her it “is the quality of relationships with students that is necessary for fostering engaged learning and thinking” (p. 155).

It is important to this work that democratic education be understood as helping to prepare students for a life of democratic participation. For Hutchinson, (2004) the importance of this concept generated a significant question,

 Currently there is a disjunction between the schools we have, where we try to create a known set of relationships, and the community that follows as students enter a larger world of strangers. What do we do to prepare them for such a shift? (p. 85)

Hutchinson argues that our democracy is made up of strangers, and our democratic ethos must more fully accommodate the understanding that democracy needs strangers. She writes, “a deep democracy, one that offers opportunities for all to flourish, will require and appreciate strangers” (p. 88). It is within this idea that this proposal turns to the
democratic education’s focus on equality and its potential to further social justice so all can flourish.

*Social Justice*

Several scholars have written about potential of democratic education to influence and impact social justice (Apple & Beane, 1995; Counts, 1939; Dewey, 1938; Green, 1999; Hutchinson, 1999; Hutchison & Romano, 1998; Parker, 2003).

Counts (1939) argued that democratic education has an “obligation” to teach equality and equity in society (p. 18). He called upon democratic education to “develop in the individual a profound allegiance to the principle of human equity, brotherhood and worth” (p. 18). Count demanded that democratic education make, every effort...to fashion a mentality that would be uncomfortable and even outraged in the presence of poverty, injustice, ruthlessness, special privilege, denial of opportunity, persecution of minorities, exploitation of the weak, master-servant relationships. (p.18)

Counts believed that this type of education would “at the same time” elevate the “level of consciousness, and sense of responsibility for correcting all violations of the democratic principle” in the minds of students (p. 18). Counts’ idea offers an interesting place for reflection about the physical and moral condition of America’s schools. He argues that a primary focus of education is to improve our democratic society, in particular the social form of democracy.

For Parker (2003), democratic education must help teach students a conception of “justice that is capable of discerning injustice” (p. 73). For him this means not just a surface level or shallow understanding of injustice but the ability to “see through the
spells cast by ideology so that injustices that are legitimized by it might be revealed” (p. 73).

For Jonathan Kozol (1992) the inequalities perpetuated in America’s public schools are “savage.” Kozol clearly explains both the inequity of school funding and the inequality this creates regarding students long term life prospects. He clearly assigns responsibility for reshaping this problem to the government. Specifically he argues that the government,

does not assign us to our homes, our summer camps, our doctors---or to Exeter. It does assign us to our public schools. Indeed, it forces us to go to them. Unless we have the wealth to pay for private education, we are compelled by law to go to public school---requiring attendance but refusing to require equity, effectively requires inequality. Compulsory inequity, perpetuated by state law, too frequently condemns our children to unequal lives. (p. 56)

Kozol argues that equality and equity in public education in America will only occur when the legislative bodies across America stand up and decide to make it happen.

Undemocratic Education

Freire (1970) argues that oppressive education, which for the purposes of this proposal is similar to undemocratic education, is partially based on a one-way narrative (p. 71). Specifically, he argues that education is often “narrative in character” by which the teacher is the orator and the students are “patient listening subjects” (p. 71). Freire noted that students learning in “the process of being narrated to become lifeless and
petrified” (p. 71). At its worst this type of education turns students into “containers, into receptacles to be filled by the teacher” (p. 72). He wrote that,

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher the depositor…This is the banking concept of education…They do, it is true, have the opportunity to become collectors or cataloguers of things they store…in the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. (p. 72)

For Freire this process ensures that students simply adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them.

The “banking education” that Freire describes stands in stark contrast to the type of democratic education advocated by Counts (1939) when he called on schools to “arouse in the coming generation a deep loyalty to the process of free discussion, criticism, and group decision—the life-blood of every democratic society” (p 18). Counts continues his argument that “schools can teach democracy” saying schools should,

Endeavor to cultivate a mistrust of all purely authoritarian pronouncements and encourage an insistence on basing all decisions of rational foundations. Within the framework of democratic ideals and procedures, it would protect the right of every minority to be heard…from the life of the school, loyalty would be transferred to those priceless guarantees in the bill of rights, to those great liberties of thought, belief, speech, press, assemblage and petition. (p. 19)

Counts’ ideals of democratic education and its place in our democracy should remind us of how beneficial democratic education can be to students as they develop as democratic
citizens. He also reminds us just how effective the type of education described by Friere as “banking education” can be in helping develop citizens who will not employ their democratic voice.

*High-Stakes Standardized Testing*

“Banking education” as described by Freire (1970) included the notion that students are the receptacle of a teacher’s “knowledge” deposits (p. 72). In the world of high-stakes testing the student’s aptitude in the practice of accurately regurgitating these deposits is the measure of one’s success. Several authors have articulated outrage about the high stakes testing environment found in most of America’s public schools (Gatto, 1992; Kohn, 2000; Kohn, 2004; Meier, 2000; Meier and Wood, 2004; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Ohanian, 1999; Poetter, Wegwert & Haerr, 2006)

Alfie Kohn (2000) noted that “standardized testing has swelled and mutated, like a creature in one of those horror movies, to the point that it now threatens to swallow our schools whole” (p. 1). He argues that “high-stakes testing has radically altered the kind of instruction that is offered in American schools, to the point that ‘teaching to the test’ has become a prominent part of the nation’s educational landscape” (p. 29). Kohn’s description of how students are taught in a high-stakes testing environment harkens to Friere’s (1970) “banking” model,

The implications for the quality of teaching are not difficult to imagine, particularly if better scores on high-stakes exams are likely to result more from memorizing math facts and algorithms, for example, than from understanding concepts. (p. 29)
This type of schooling is most undemocratic because it effectively erodes the relationships between individuals and pits students against one another (Meier, 2004).

Meier, (2004), writes of “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB), our current legal mandate that pushes forward the high-stakes testing agenda, that NCLB takes this one giant step forward—pitting every child against every other child to look good and get ahead, and every school against every other school, and it does so with a measurement tool that barely acknowledges anything but test scores as a measure of a sound education. (p. 70)

In schools that are poor or underfunded the pressure to perform under the NCLB act is problematic, because it “forces local districts to engage in one-size-fits all practices that ignore the needs of children” (p. 71).

*An Example: Undemocratic Teaching*

Jean Anyon (1980) provides a useful structure for understanding the differences found among public schools in complex industrial societies, especially related to “educational experience and curriculum knowledge understanding [offered] to students in different social classes” (p. 179). Her work illustrates the differences found in schools and helps bring to light the undemocratic education experienced by some of the students in this study. In her work, Anyon outlines a critical analysis of fifth grader student experiences from the perspective of the different types of schools she identified.

Anyon distinguished the types of schools based on the work and income of the student’s parents, which is equated to socio-economic class standings. She then assigned a name to each school type. She identified several types of schools: “Working-class, Middle-class, Affluent Professional and Executive Elite” (pp. 184-185).
Anyon argues that students in Working-class schools, which she defines as “blue-collar” and notes that “less than a third of the fathers are skilled,” are treated much like blue collar workers who follow a set of tasks or directions (p.184). In these schools students are offered a curriculum of “following the steps of a procedure” (p.186). In these schools students are not offered the opportunity to explore the process, to develop a sense of mastery of content, instead they are asked to follow the teacher’s instructions with little or no idea of the “lesson” before them. Anyon explains this process in relation to different mathematical areas where

work is also carrying out often unexplained, fragmented procedures. For example, one of the teachers led children through a series of steps to make a one-inch grid on their paper without telling them they were making a one-inch grid, or that it would be used to study scale. (p.187)

Anyon notes that a student was admonished by her teacher during this exercise for being creative and exploring an alternative and faster method of one-inch grid production. The teacher said, “No, you don’t; you don’t even know what I’m making yet. Do it this way or it is wrong” (p. 187). The teacher in this situation makes it clear to the student that the teacher has knowledge and the student does not, including what is the right procedure and what is the wrong procedure. This is not in line with the ideas of democratic education because Anyon reports students are being judged only on their ability to follow and comply with teacher directions. This sets students up for work that requires no critical thinking or initiative rather it prepares students to follow directions and routines.

In contrast, children in Affluent Professional Schools, which Anyon (1980) notes “has apparent population that is as the upper income level of the upper middle class and is
predominantly professional” are more in line with the ideals of democratic education as described in this proposal (p. 185). Specifically, Anyon writes that “In the affluent professional school, work is creative activity carried out independently. The students are continually asked to express and apply ideas and concepts” (p. 192). In the working-class school the creative student is admonished for her ingenuity and thinking skills while in the more democratic environment of the affluent professional schools the children are encouraged to think creatively without the intellectual reins being pulled. Anyon argues this type of education teaches children that they need to be “society’s successful artists, intellectuals, legal, scientific, and technical experts and other professionals” (p. 201).

Taking an Educational Stand

Mursell’s (1955) assertion that “Our schools can make it their chief business, year by year, generation by generation, to promote and uphold democracy in American life” may seem strong, but others have written that educators and teachers should be willing to hold and maintain strong positions (p. 52). In asking educators to be true to who they are George S. Counts (1932) adds to this argument. He firmly argues that,

Democratic sentiments should be cultivated and that a better and richer life should be the outcome of education, but in neither case would I place responsibility on either God or the natural order. I would merely contend that as educators we must make many choices involving the development of attitudes in boys and girls and that we should not be afraid to acknowledge the faith that is in us or mayhap the forces that compel us. (p. 20)
For Counts, as articulated above, being true to oneself as an educator is of the utmost importance. However, it is important to note that this act is not without potential pitfalls for teachers, especially those who chose to be democratic in schools that are not so.

For most teachers, school is not a democratic place. Herbert Kohl (1994) offers an important insight into the potential dilemmas related to being a democratic teacher trying to remain committed to democratic education in a system that is not democratic. Kohl explains the struggle to teach well as,

A militant activity that requires a belief in children’s strengths and intelligence no matter how poorly they may function under the regimes imposed upon them. It requires understanding student failure as system failure, especially when it encompasses the majority of students in a class, school or school system. It also means stepping back and seeing oneself as a part of a dysfunctional system and developing the courage to maladjust rather than adjust oneself to much of current educational practice. (pp. 144-145)

Based on Kohl’s argument the tension between democratic educational values and more traditional educational expectations makes the sustained democratic effort on the part of the teachers in this proposed study a remarkable feat of perseverance.

Places of Democratic Educational Practice

In the review of the literature sites of democratic practice in education emerged (Horton, 1998; Jacobs, 2003; Lightfoot, 1983; Meier, 1995; Wood, 1998; Wood, 2005). It is interesting that these examples are on the macro level or school level. These schools include democratic teachers, but more significantly they are examples of entire systems moving in a democratic educational direction. In this section of the literature review I
will look at two schools in the Appalachian area, one working with adults and the other
with high school students.

I opened this proposal with the following quote by Myles Horton (2003) regarding democracy,

> I think it is important to understand that the quality of the process you use to get
to a place determines the ends, so when you want to build a democratic society,
you have to act democratically in every way. If you want love and brotherhood,
you’ve got to incorporate them as you go along, because you can’t just expect
them to occur . . . A long-range goal for me is a direction that grows out of loving
people, and caring for people, and believing in people’s capacity to govern
themselves. (Jacobs, p. xiii-xiv)

Horton spent most of his life being democratic and exposing others, mostly adult
learners, to democratic education at the Highlander Center in Tennessee. In a speech
given at the University of Tennessee in 1967, Horton said that the

> Highlander doesn’t attempt to provide the total educational process of people with
whom we deal. Our students bring to Highlander their experiences and ways of
thinking and doing. We try to stimulate their thinking by exposing them to
consultants, books, ect. But more important, they learn how to learn from each
other. (Jacobs, 2003, pp. 6-7)

Horton’s (1998) idea of democracy includes the words “free” and “empowered” (p. 169).
He said that “when I use the word ‘Democracy,’ it is not limited to political decision
making, to voting. It is a philosophical concept meaning that people are really free and
empowered to make collectively the decisions that affect their lives” (p. 169).
Highlander’s democratic educational impact is illustrated in the words of Dale Jacobs (2003). He wrote of Highlander that “from its inception, Highlander was controversial because education was seen as a way to understand and change one’s world rather than as a way to advance within the existing socioeconomic system” (p. xv). Much of Highlander’s early democratic education was controversial because it focused on the social injustice found in labor relations, civil rights and environmental issues and it worked to help people develop their own solutions to these significant social problems.

George Wood (2005) wrote of his work with Federal Hocking High School (FHHS), located in rural Appalachian Ohio that high school is “democracy’s finishing school” (p. xxii). In his attempt to develop FHHS as a democratic educational experience for students Wood engaged the students in their own education, and the governance of the school. Wood outlines several strategies he used in FHHS to help bring students into a democratic place of sharing the “power” in the school (p. 128). These strategies include several important ideas such as having students monitor their own progress toward graduation and “having every student do something significant” which means expecting students to engage in a meaningful internship project. However, it is the strategy of giving “students Decision-Making Power” that is of the most interest to this proposal (p. 137).

Wood states, “At FHHS we’ve worked to include students in as much of the decision making about school as possible” (p. 137). He notes,

Again and again it proves true: the more opportunities we give our students to be full-fledged citizens of our school, the more they amaze us with their ability to take on responsibility. (p. 138)
In FHHS democracy is lived everyday as a community (p. 190).

These two examples of democratic educational practice are both from the Appalachian region. It is fitting that the teacher narratives I plan to collect for this study also happened largely in rural Appalachian Ohio. In the following section I will explore Appalachia.

Appalachia

Another important layer present in this work is its geographical and regional location; specifically, rural Appalachian Ohio. In reference to this study’s geographical and regional location I am concerned with the cultural elements of the Appalachian Ohio region, whether actual (i.e., the realities of poverty) or perceived (i.e., imposed negative stereotypes). The teachers in this study work, by choice, in rural Appalachian Ohio. The importance of understanding the rural Appalachian context rests in becoming familiar with regional stereotypes and the negative connotations hurled at rural Appalachian peoples. In addition many of the teachers in this study are employed in poorly and inequitably funded schools and work with children who often are from families with meager income levels.

How do people become labeled as “less-than,” assigned a designation that carries derogatory connotations, become subjugated, exploited and devalued because of where they live? What is the “process” at work that helps define another as the “other?” What components of cultural communication, ideas or conceptualizations, intersect to congeal a persistent and “universal” negative understanding of certain groups? What impact does social class have on education in Appalachia? What makes a region a stereotype? These are the questions that drive this section of the literature review.
By utilizing the work of neo-Marxist cultural and communication theorists Stuart Hall (2001) and Raymond Williams (2001) the “naturalization” of the Appalachian stereotype through print and film media can be more easily understood. Relying in part on the work of Karl Marx related to the reproduction of dominate ideas or the reproduction of the means of production, Hall and Williams both offer an important theoretical underpinning for understanding the naturalization of Appalachian stereotypes and their potential impact on education in the region.

America is often thought of as the land of opportunity, a place where hard work and individual effort allow anyone to rise above their station (Sieber, 2005). The importance of this myth, “the myth of America as a meritocracy” is important to our understanding of societal or macro level stereotypes especially when such stereotypes involve and help perpetuate poverty and restrict democratic participation.

*The “Naturalization” of an Idea*

When the practices of society become so enmeshed into the fabric of social life as to not be questioned, the ideas surrounding these practices exist in a naturalized state of understanding. Another way of understanding the naturalization of ideas is through the concept of Hegemony. Raymond Williams (2001) explains hegemony and its distinction, For hegemony supposes the existence of something which is truly total . . . which is lived at such a depth, which saturates the society to such as extent, and which, as Gramsci put it, even constitutes the substance and limit of common sense for most people under its sway, that it corresponds to the reality of social experience very much more clearly than any notion derived from the formula of base and superstructure. For if ideology were merely some abstract, imposed set of notions,
if our social and political and cultural ideas and assumptions and habits were merely the result of specific manipulation, of a kind of overt training which might be simply ended or withdrawn, then the society would be very much easier to move and to change than in practice it has ever been or is. This notion of hegemony as deeply saturating the consciousness of a society seems to me to be fundamental. And hegemony has the advantage over general notions of totality, that it at the same time emphasizes the fact of domination. (pp. 156-157)

By applying Williams’ ideas of hegemony to stereotypes, especially Appalachian stereotypes, it becomes easier to understand the ease with which Appalachia is ridiculed in mainstream American society. The long standing negative representation of Appalachia in the media (e.g., print, film, photographs and television) has established the hillbilly stereotype as a primary place of reference for many in America when the term Appalachia is uttered.

**Encoding and Decoding a Stereotype**

Stuart Hall (2001) offers an interesting insight into how media communication operates to continue a dominant idea in a society. Hall argues that information in a media form, especially visual media, is encoded with understood “frameworks of knowledge.” These include meanings understood in society. For Hall the dilemma in a communication is in how these “frames of knowledge” are encoded or made into meaning. He argues that once a message is encoded and sent to an audience it must undergo a process of decoding on the part of the audience. In relation to this proposal Hall notes that certain codes or frames of knowledge are so ingrained that they are not questioned. Specifically, Hall states,
Certain codes may, of course, be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed --- the effect of articulation between sign and referent --- but to be ‘naturally given.’ Simple visual signs appear to have achieved a ‘near-universality’ in this sense: though evidence remains that even apparently ‘natural’ visual codes are cultural-specific. However, this does not mean no codes have intervened; rather, that the codes have been profoundly naturalized. The operation of naturalized codes reveals not the transparency and ‘naturalness’ of language but the depth, the habituation and the near-universality of the codes in use. (p. 170)

Hall’s ideas offer an interesting place to look at Appalachia, specifically related to the mainstream interpretations and beliefs about the Appalachian region.

*What is Appalachia?*

The debate centering on the meaning of Appalachia emerges as a primary concern related to this proposal. Obermiller and Maloney (2002) offer the following as an example of the debate related to the social construction of Appalachia,

“Appalachia” is a fugitive concept. It has many disguises—cultural gem, economic hinterland, literary motif, energy colony, retirement haven, ecological disaster, recreational oasis, common stereotype, and all-American archetype to name a few. The region is often reported lurking at the intersection of history and social change. Eye witnesses argue about its age and actual location . . . Some experts witnesses say that there actually is no “Appalachia” that the name just
represents a figment of the academic imagination . . . Even if Appalachia was a mental construct, it would be a valuable one.” (p. xi)

Obermiller and Maloney, offer a synopsis of the shifting ground Appalachia represents. For the purposes of this proposal the common Appalachia stereotype and the slipperiness of a definitive definition of Appalachia are central to understanding the naturalization of the hillbilly stereotype, both on a societal level and on the individual level.

For the purposes of this proposal the use of the term Appalachia is based on the Appalachian Regional Commissions (ARC) definition of Appalachia (see definition of terms found later in this chapter). Several scholars have critiqued the numerous definitions of Appalachia and the ARC’s definition is among the most heavily debated (Couto, 1994; Walls & Billings, 1977; Shapiro, 1978; Williams, 2002).

Appalachia and Appalachian Stereotypes

The most persistent and unshakable collective image of Appalachia is the mountain hillbilly. “Even today, any mention of the Appalachian mountains conjures up images of ‘hillbillies,’ ‘log cabins,’ ‘shootin’ arns,’ ‘fudin ,’ ‘moonshine,’ ‘revenooers,’ and dueling banjos in the popular mind. The southern hillbilly has become the stock character of popular culture” (Otto, 1986, p.3). These negative images of Appalachia and Appalachians do not represent a new phenomenon. Ronald L. Lewis (1999) offers a perspective, from which we can begin to understand the term “Appalachia” and its implications for the people from this region,

Appalachia is a region without a formal history. Born in the fertile minds of late-nineteenth-century local color writers, “Appalachia” was invented in the caricatures and atmospheric landscapes of the escapist fiction they penned to
entertain the emergent middle class. The accuracy of these stories and travelogues, the dominant idioms of this genre, generated little or no critical evaluation of the characterizations of either mountain people or the landscape itself. (p.21)

The importance of Lewis’s words and the lasting implications of making Appalachia, a place of “otherness” aides our understanding of the impact stereotypes have on the Appalachian people. Anne Shelby (1999) writes, “Being Appalachian means being presented throughout one’s life with images of Appalachia that bear little or no resemblance to one’s own experience. The difference between the image and the reality creates dissonance, a contradiction to be resolved, and people try to do that in different ways” (p. 153-154).

*Insights from an Appalachian School System*

The ideas and images associated with rural education become complicated by the physical geography, as well as a student’s current social station as determined in part by their socio-economic status. Both education and social station are linked in relation to student and teacher expectations of each other (Anyon, 1980; Reck, Reck & Keefe, 1993; Willis, 1977). Currently the physical structures of schools are also linked to the income levels of a given community (Kozol, 1992). In addition, for many teachers the concept of “rural schooling” creates different expectations when students are identified as being “Appalachian” (Reck, Reck & Keefe, 1993). These expectations can carry negative connotations. The negative images of Appalachia and Appalachians do not represent a new phenomenon (Lewis, 1999).
In a study of teacher perceptions of students researchers Reck, Reck and Keefe (1993) examined a school system in Appalachia. These researchers offer important insights into the perceptions of teachers working in Appalachia and their perceptions of Appalachian children. They report the following elementary teacher’s description of Appalachian students she/he is working with,

Sometimes teachers express considerable prejudice against one or the other groups [Rednecks or rural kids and Intellectuals or town kids]. For example, one non-Appalachian elementary school teacher described “Rednecks” in the following way: ‘They are county students who are in the lower tracks. They chew tobacco, have long greasy hair, are not clean and smell, use bad grammar and profanity, and their dress is not acceptable.’ (p. 119)

These researchers also report a general trend among teachers to complement town students more than rural students. Specifically they report,

“Town kids are more confident and do better academically”; “Town kids have good grammar and descriptive language”; “Town kids have more social skills are more confident and more involved in school activities, and do better academically”; “Town kids are more trained to have manners”; “Rural kids are more inhibited uncomfortable in new situations”; “Rural kids have bad grammar and slower slurred speech.” (p.120)

The research findings described by Reck and others, illustrate the need to better understand the impact Appalachian stereotypes have on teacher perceptions, especially if these perceptions influence curriculum delivery. This is critical to my study since one of
the characteristics of the self-identified democratic teachers is their commitment to remaining in this region and working with rural Appalachian students.

Insights From an Appalachian Scholar

John Alexander Williams (2002) explains the development of the Appalachian stereotype from its earliest inception, his work offers a sound place to begin to fully understand the process “naturalization of ideas” described by Hall. Williams writes,

Appalachia’s image as a territory of cultural deviance was reiterated in dozens of popular magazine articles in the early twentieth century and by numerous two reel “mountain melodramas,” some filmed on location in the Blue Ridge Mountains and shown in movie theaters all over the country. Eventually came talking films and Hollywood epics, not to mention more books articles, comic strips and cartoons, Broadway musicals and television comedies. (p. 199)

Williams work helps uncover the encoded messages that Appalachians as a group are to be feared and controlled. Williams notes,

Admittedly, mountaineers were not the only rural stereotypes served up to urban masses in this fashion. The same media generation that produced the feuding and whiskey-running hillbilly also produced the grizzled prospector, the Midwestern hayseed, and above all, the cowboy. But thanks to the feudists and the moonshiners, none of the other stereotypes had quite the capacity for violence and evil-doing as the Appalachian mountaineer. (p. 199)

For the purposes of this proposal the central themes related to working class education, regional stereotypes, the stratification of American society, the myth of an American
meritocracy are central to the importance of understanding the potential for change that might be found in democratic education.

Qualitative Research

This dissertation is a narrative inquiry of the “work life” of democratic educators, including the influences and other elements of their life experience that have shaped their democratic educational view. It seeks to understand the following question, “What can we more fully understand and appreciate about the experiences of democratic teachers working in rural Appalachia?” As described in chapter one, this study utilizes an “appreciative inquiry” approach.

The methodology of this research project is supported by current qualitative research literature (Bryman and Burgess, 1999; Clandinin, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clough & Nutbrown, 2002; Miller, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Patton, 2002; Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Specifically, I do not rely on a comparison to quantitative research in an attempt to offer a definition of qualitative research. Bryman and Burgess (1999) describe why comparing the two methodological approaches is not helpful. They state,

Often accounts of qualitative research are set up in terms of its difference from, and often opposition to, quantitative research. This strategy is not intrinsically problematic but runs the risk of qualitative research being formulated in terms of what quantitative research is not. (p. x)

Furthermore, other researchers note that qualitative research offers its own important perspective related to understanding experience. Patton (2002), states that qualitative research is a descriptive inquiry. He explains that qualitative data should, “take us, as
readers, into the time and place of the observation so that we know what it was like to have been there. They capture and communicate someone else’s experience of the world in his or her own words. Qualitative data tell a story” (p.47).

At its most basic level qualitative research “seeks to probe deeply into the research setting to obtain in-depth understanding about the way things are, why they are that way, and how participants in the context perceive them” (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006, p. 14). The following “philosophical assumptions” articulated by Creswell (1998, p. 19) fit well with my understanding of “knowledge” and guided my choice to pursue a qualitative research design (Creswell) I quote,

- Knowledge is within the meanings people make of it.
- Knowledge is gained through people talking about their meanings.
- Knowledge is laced with personal biases and values.
- Knowledge is written in a personal, close-up way.
- Knowledge evolves, emerges, and is inextricably tied to the context in which it is studied.

Selecting a qualitative narrative design allowed me more fully to explore the unique experiences of selected individuals who have committed themselves to a life of democratic teaching.

It is my hope that this research represents what Rossman and Rallis (1998) described as a “compelling story” (p. 17). Specifically, these authors write that qualitative research can be seen as a “descriptive cultural study” that explores the participants “struggles, triumphs, courage and ordinariness. Ideally the result is a compelling story about the world the researcher has explored” (p.170). The “compelling story” of this
research study is of the struggle of this select group of teachers as they engage in
democratic pedagogical practices in settings that are not always supportive of a
democratic process. In addition this study seeks to bring to the surface the work of these
teachers over an extended period of time as they have engaged in “the long walk with
democracy.”

Understanding Qualitative Research

In this section I will explain both the theoretical underpinnings and the pragmatic
elements or the “how” of this research study from a theoretical perspective. In addition I
will explore the use of narrative inquiry as a qualitative research vehicle and offer
specific applications of it to this research study. Also, I will describe my research
framework of Appreciative Inquiry and why it is a good “fit” for this narrative inquiry.

The Research Framework

Several researchers describe the central role the research question has on shaping
the development and design of the project (Creswell, 2000; Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006;
Locke, Spirduso & Silverman, 2000). Creswell (2000) states that if a researcher is
“willing to engage in qualitative inquiry, then the person needs to . . . First, select a
qualitative study because of the nature of the research question” (p. 17). Gay, Mills and
Airasian, (2006), in a discussion related to choosing a qualitative or quantitative research
design state, “Depending on the nature of the question, topic, or problem to be
investigated, one of these approaches will generally be more appropriate than the other”
(p. 10). Locke, Spirduso and Silverman, (2000) note that as a researcher “Your training
and personal values are not irrelevant to this argument . . . In the end, however, it is the
match between the paradigm and the problem that must carry the day” (p. 102). For these
authors the nature of your research question is the primary consideration for the selection of a research methodology.

Likewise, others have argued philosophically that one’s world view or personal paradigms influence what types of questions to ask and so pre-influence the choice of methodology. I am not in full agreement with the premise that methodology grows from the nature of the investigation or research question. Specifically, my educational world view has a significant influence on both the method and framework of this project, especially related to how I understand and value this work. In addition, one’s worldview often impacts the types of questions one might choose to investigate. Hence, methodological choices are not a simple linear progression starting with research question and ending in a methodological framework.

*Narrative Inquiry*

The purpose of this research study is to describe and analyze the narratives of democratic teachers, specifically those teaching in rural Appalachia. Particular attention will be given to the educative context and practice in rural Appalachia as it intersects with the social construction of socio-economic class, regional stereotypes and their potential impact on the educational efficacy of rural Appalachian Ohio students. Participants participated in semi-structured interviews designed to explore their democratic ideas, their educational practices related to their understanding of how learning occurs in democratic classrooms, how they have persevered as democratic teachers and their understanding of how standardization imposed by external forces has affected their teaching.
This narrative inquiry utilized semi-structured interviews as its data collection method. This technique will further develop the theoretical construct of what democratic education looks like in a rural Appalachian working class setting. In an effort to bring clarity to this project it is important that I explain the distinctions and similarities found among life stories or autobiographies and narrative inquiries. Researching life histories is a unique qualitative method; Miller (2000) noted that,

within the biographical perspective, ‘process’ has a particular double-edged meaning. When a person’s lifetime is viewed as a whole, the idea of their ‘history’ can be apprehended at two levels. First, the individual has their own history of personal development and change as they ‘process’ along their life course. Second, a considerable amount of time passes as they move along their life course. In this respect, historical events and social change at the societal level impinge upon the individual’s own unique life history. (p. 9)

For the purposes of this dissertation I focused on the narratives of democratic teachers that include their development as teachers over the course of their careers. However, I am purposely not seeking to understand the entirety of their lived experiences. I agree with Miller’s argument that individuals do “process along their life,” therefore, I acknowledge that all narratives are fluid and not fixed or static. In addition, Miller’s observation that “historical events” shape a person’s interpretation of their own understanding of their life is important because the teachers in this study have experienced the shifting ground of educational policy making as it relates to their teacher autonomy in the classroom.
In Narrative Inquiry the focus is on the complexity of the human story. It is this complexity that makes narratives a potentially rich source of data related to an individual’s unique experiences, as Lawler (2002) notes,

I am not using ‘narrative’ here to indicate a story that simply ‘carries’ a set of ‘facts’. Rather, I see narratives as social products produced by people within the context of specific social, historical and cultural locations. They are related to the experiences that people have of their lives, but they are not transparent carriers of the experience. (p. 242)

It is the “social products” of the teachers in this study who have consistently taught from a democratic pedagogical position that I am most interested in understanding.

The importance of hearing the life experiences of these democratic teachers has influenced my research design. Specifically, I utilized a qualitative design centering on narrative inquiry. For Clandinin and Connelly (2000) the following characteristics form the “working concepts” of narrative inquiry. They write,

Narrative Inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place series of places, and in social interactions with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling the stories of the experiences that make up people’s lives, both individual and social. Simply stated . . . narrative inquiry is stories lived and told. (p.20)

I believe the powerful nature of narrative inquiry helped me to tell the complex stories of a group of teachers working in rural Appalachian Ohio who have attempted to conduct
their educational practice from a democratic orientation. The promise of narrative inquiry rests in its ability to allow a researcher to enter into a partnership with participants and develop the participant’s written narrative in a collaborative relationship.

*Appreciative Inquiry*

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is grounded in a perspective that values positive attributes. Specifically, Appreciative Inquiry can be described as “a process that searches for what is best in people and organizations. It is a participative, collaborative and systematic approach to inquiry that seeks what is right in an organization in order to create a desired future” (Preskill & Coghlan, 2003, p.1). Appreciative Inquiry asks the following types of questions:

1. Discovery: “What is the best of what is?” (Appreciating)
2. Dream: “What might be?” (Envisioning Results)
3. Design: “What should be the ideal?” (Constructing the Future)
4. Destiny: How to empower, learn and adjust/improvise?” (Sustaining the Change) (pp. 10-11).

By utilizing an Appreciative Inquiry foundation I hope to find the most positive elements of the democratic practices of these teachers.

As it applies to this research the first principle of “Discovery” is at the center of my inquiry. As applied to the research questions, the AI principle of “Discovery” can be illustrated in the interview questions of this study. Based on the work of Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, (2003), authors Preskill and Coghlan (2003), note that the first stages of the AI process “consists of participants interviewing each other and sharing stories about their peak experiences.” Appreciative Inquiry was originally designed as a
research method to investigate and facilitate positive organizational change. Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, describe the following foundational (or generic) questions that guide Appreciative Inquiry interviews (p. 10):

1. Describe a high-point in your organization---a time when you were most alive and engaged.
2. Without being modest, what is it that you most value about yourself, your work, and your organization.
3. What are the core factors that give life to your organization, without which the organization would cease to exist?
4. What three wishes do you have to enhance the health and vitality of your organization?

These guiding questions helped to shape the interview questions and to establish the overall tone of the interviews. I am not trying to solve a problem, rather; my hope is to more fully understand and appreciate the good practices of democratic educators.

The intent of this dissertation is not to criticize the democratic practices used by the teachers in this study. In addition this study does not attempt to criticize other teachers who are not self identified as democratic teachers. This work represents an attempt to understand the life work of the teachers in this study and their understanding and practice of democratic ideals found in their teaching. Hence this is an appreciative inquiry. To more fully understand appreciative inquiry I will offer a more detailed explanation in chapter three. However, for now, this brief introduction by David Cooperrider (2002) helps to frame this perspective. Cooperrider writes,
Think about [Appreciative Inquiry] AI as a “life-centric” kind of inquiry that creates an ever-expanding context of discovery for the connection or fusion of relational capacity: health connected to another’s health, strength connected to another’s strength, trust connected to another’s trust, agility connected to another’s agility, and innovation connected to another’s innovation. And its premise is this: *Human systems construct their “worlds” in the direction of what they persistently ask questions about, and this propensity is strongest and most sustainable when the means and ends of inquiry are positively correlated. The single most prolific thing a group can do, if it aims to liberate the human spirit and consciously construct a better future, is to make the “positive change core” of any system the common and explicit property of all.* (Italics his, p. ix).

In a condensed form, AI explores what works best from a positive perspective, utilizing the most knowledgeable of all participants; the people who live the experience. Barrett and Fry (2005) note that “Through appreciative stories, the positive core of strengths generated from multiple voices and stories takes on a degree of sacredness—something to be honored, revered, nurtured, and protected” (p. 97). These authors continue stating, “A common thread in all work with AI is the solicitation of stories about “best past” experiences in relation to the specific strategic topic under inquiry” (p. 99).

Also, it is important to this work that I explore the theoretical frames central to understanding democratic education utilizing a democratic investigative process. I think appreciative inquiry as understood above dovetails with the earlier stated elements of democratic education by providing a logical and compatible orientation to this narrative research. I believe this Narrative Inquiry as conducted from an Appreciative Inquiry
position as told by the grassroots voices of classroom teacher—not academics or policy makers or politicians—who have committed themselves to democratic education allows their stories to be told, understood and celebrated as these stories illuminate the “best past.”
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction to the Methodology

This research explored the pedagogical practice, ideology and commitments of a group of educators who defined themselves as democratic and/or progressive teachers. This research goes beyond a description of democratic practices in education and explored how and why these self identified democratic educators maintained their commitment to democratic pedagogical practice in the face of political policies that call for the reduction of democracy in the classroom through centralized, universal and predetermined outcome measures. I tried to understand how they have attempted to understand and define democratic education in their teaching practice in an underserved, under resourced and underrepresented population of students and families (generally working class and/or rural working poor people in Appalachian Ohio). The following section explores several concepts important to this qualitative research including its positive perspective, its narrative focus and my researcher positionality.

As an educational researcher I am primarily interested in the lived experiences of teachers. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) offer an interesting observation about education and lived experiences from the work of John Dewey,

For Dewey, education, experience, and life are inextricably intertwined. When one asks what it means to study education, the answer—in its most general sense—is to study experience. Following Dewey, the study of education is the study of life—for example, the study of epiphanies, rituals, routines, metaphors, and everyday actions. We learn about education from thinking about life, and we
learn about life from thinking about education. This thinking about education as experience is part of what educators do in schools. (pp. xxiii-xxiv)

Clandinin and Connelly highlight the importance of a worldview that values individual experiences. I am interested in conducting educational research that seeks to understand the experiences of individual teachers on their own terms, in their own words, through their own unique and richly informative narratives. I believe that by working to understand the experiences of the democratic teachers in this study I more fully understand how these teachers have managed to remain committed to their work in the face of obstacles and how to best help students experience democracy through education.

One of the purposes of this research study was to gather the narratives of democratic teachers, specifically those teaching in rural Appalachian Ohio. As I gathered these narratives of democratic teachers I paid particular attention to the educative context and educational practices in rural Appalachian schools as they intersect with social constructions of socio-economic class, regional stereotypes and K-12 student academic struggle and/or success.

Teachers involved in this work participated in semi-structured interviews designed to explore their ideas regarding the relationship between democracy and education, their personal educational practices related to their understanding of how learning occurs in democratic classrooms. In addition, the semi-structured interviews explored how these teachers have persevered as democratic educators in the face of external political policy mandates that encourage an undemocratic educational stance.
A Positive Foundation

This study is not a vehicle to identify a problem, but rather a means to explore the narratives of democratic teachers from a positive point of view in order to more completely understand their experiences. It was my hope that I would gain an understanding of the educational philosophies and classroom practices that inform and motivate these teachers as they continue to teach democratically; I did. In order to accomplish this I gathered the narrative teaching histories of people who have committed a significant portion of their lives to an ideal of democratic or progressive education.

I assumed that the teachers in this proposed study chose a democratic teaching path, this was not always true. Some of these teachers found democratic teaching and developed into democratic teachers. This appeared to be an interesting decision that these democratic teachers made in the face of obstacles that might suggest a less thorny path would be desirable (e.g., simply following the mandated curriculum related to high stake standardized testing or by not challenging the status quo in schools that are organized in an autocratic or hierarchical manner). I view this commitment as a choice the teachers I interviewed made in relation to their educational philosophy and practice that speaks to a deep commitment they have for living democratically. Hence, their choice to be democratic educators was made from a philosophical position that allows democracy to be lived in their classrooms everyday regardless of the forces working against their practices from a non-democratic position. By understanding these teachers’ narratives, their commitments and practices, I attempted to shed light on how democratic educators can facilitate an environment for students and help students practice democracy in their classrooms. This research should be of interest to in-service, pre-service teachers and
university teacher educators who may not fully understand the ways democracy can work in classroom settings.

Previous research has been completed on the philosophical bases for democratic education (Dewey, 1916; Dewey, 1938; Kelly, 1995; McLaren, 2003; Soder, 1996). In addition, research has been undertaken to explore the problems facing democratic educators. My research adds an important dimension relative to exploring what positive aspects democratic teachers utilize to continue democratic teaching paths against external pressures that would ask them to be more authoritative. Other research has been conducted with a focus on urban schools (Anyon, 2005; Cibulka & Boyd, 2003; Fine & Weis, 2003; Kopetz, Lease & Warren-Kring, 2006; Michie, 2005; Obiakor & Beachum, 2005; Rury, 2005; Weis & Fine, 2005). My research adds a new dimension to the body of literature about democratic educators serving in rural Appalachian Ohio.

The Researcher

Inherent in this dissertation and of central importance to me as a researcher is “Appalachia” and what it means to be an “Appalachian.” I was born in Charleston, West Virginia and have lived most of my life in rural Appalachia. I consider myself an Appalachian. My “in group” status is central to understanding my passion related to investigating the negative connotations associated with being Appalachian and the effect these connotations have on children from the region.

Creswell (1998) offers important insights for “in-group” researchers. Specifically, he warns against “backyard research.” Creswell argues, “Undoubtedly, qualitative researchers bring their values, biases, and understandings to a project, and intimate knowledge of a setting may be an asset” (p.114). However, he argues the researcher’s
positionality may become a negative when data collection begins. He warns that, “individuals [research participants] might withhold information, slant information toward what they want the researcher to hear . . .” (p. 114). Creswell maintains that the potential significance of the research outweighs these concerns.

While my status as an “in-group” researcher allows me to understand much of the cultural context of Appalachian Ohio, the potential for this to “blind” me is moderated by two important considerations. First, many of the democratic educators whom I interviewed are not from Appalachia originally, although most have committed themselves to this region. Second, my academic journey in higher education has allowed me to view competing theories related to Appalachian culture and values. These various perspectives informed my analysis. In addition, an awareness of my positionality related to this research will, in and of itself, assist me to be cautious as I develop and present my overall understandings of the narratives collected.

Participants

The participants of this study were selected based on their participation and/or association with the former Institute for Democracy in Education (IDE). This institute was formerly housed in the College of Education at Ohio University. The names of prospective participants were obtained via a conversation with one of the Institute’s former directors, Dr. Jaylynne Hutchinson, my dissertation director. Membership or participation in IDE was voluntary and open to the public; hence, no one’s privacy was compromised by being identified as a potential participant.

The first participants to be interviewed were be K-12 classroom teachers who had worked to establish a grassroots organization they called “Friday Roundtables.” This
group functioned as a democratic teacher support organization. For the purposes of this research, these original Roundtable teachers will be referred to as “Roundtable teachers” throughout this study. Other participants were identified through snow-ball sampling techniques as the “Roundtable teachers” were asked to identify other democratic teachers.

**Snowball Sample**

In an effort to establish a sample that is as inclusive as possible of democratic teachers who have taught or are teaching in this area I, as stated above, asked the “round table teachers” to help identify additional democratic teachers working in rural Appalachian Ohio. A technique known as “snowball sampling” was employed (Patton, 2002, p. 237). This process is an effective “approach for locating information-rich informants or critical cases . . .the process begins by asking well-situated people: ‘Who knows a lot about_____? Whom should I talk to? By asking a number of people who else to talk with, the snowball gets bigger and bigger as you accumulate new information-rich cases” (Patton, 2002, p. 237).

The group of teachers not originally associated with the Friday Roundtable group, are referred to as “second generation” democratic teachers. I use this term because the ideas related to democratic education initially explored by the “Roundtable teachers” were passed down to other teachers. This transfer of knowledge occurred without a formal group structure to support the effort. Many of the “second generation” democratic teachers have had some type of relationship with the “Roundtable teachers” including student teaching experiences and other professional relationships. By using these two methods of identifying potential participants I identified and contacted 20 teachers. I interviewed 11 teachers for this study.
Procedures

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board to proceed with this research (See Appendix B), all prospective participants were contacted via a hard copy letter via U.S. mail. Initial contact introduced them to the study, explain the study’s purpose, methods and ask for their participation (see Appendix C). Within one week of the initial contact via a letter, I conducted a follow-up via a personal phone call to determine their interest and willingness to participate and responded to any questions they had.

The initial contact conversation included a summary description of the research project, an explication of the commitments of participation, a statement guaranteeing confidentiality and an explanation of the consent to participate form. At that time I will explained to the potential participants that their identity and the identity of the schools in which they work or have worked would be given pseudonyms in order to remain anonymous.

Once it was established that the potential participant was willing to be part of the study, I scheduled an appointment for a one-on-one semi-structured interview. The time and location of the interview was determined based upon the participant’s schedule. The semi-structured interviews lasted no longer that one hour and forty-five minutes; most were about an one hour long. All interviews were recorded on audio tape for later verbatim transcription. In addition, at the conclusion of the interviews participants were asked for consent for a second contacted over the next 12 months if needed to conduct a follow-up conversation or interview. All agreed to this request.
Informed Consent

At the beginning the first meeting I reviewed the purposes of the research project with each participant prior to conducting the one-on-one semi-structured interview. This discussion included a full disclosure of the research design including the study’s qualitative nature and narrative inquiry processes. Prior to beginning the one-on-one interview an informed consent form was reviewed with the participants. Following this, time was provided for the participant to ask questions of the researcher. After this occurred I asked the participants to sign the research consent form (see Appendix D).

At the point of initial contact the potential participant were able to decline participation immediately without being pressured, coerced or unduly influenced to participate. The time between initial contact and actual participation in a one-on-one interview provided each participant with an opportunity to reconsider their decision about study participation. All participants were advised that at any point in the interview process they could decide to end their participation, and can do so without being pressured to continue. Participants could have withdrawn their participation at any time and for whatever reason, expressed or not.

Confidentiality

All materials and data (audio-recorded one-on-one semi-structured interviews, and all verbatim transcribed interview materials) were accessible only to me, the primary investigator, and my dissertation advisor and committee. All participants were be notified in the “consent to participate” form that the transcribed (and anonymous) interview data might be shared with the dissertation advisor and committee. Upon completion of the interview each participant was given a pseudonym in order to ensure privacy. A separate
list of names with their pseudonym was kept separately from the data so that in the process of transcribing, coding and analyzing the data, the identity of the participants was kept anonymous.

The tape recordings or digital data of the one-on-one interviews were stored in the investigator’s office in a locked file drawer or in the investigator’s home in a locked file cabinet. Only the investigator and a transcriber had access to the data. The tapes or digital data was destroyed after the completion of the transcription process.

Participant confidentiality in this study is important because there could be a slight risk for current teachers that their employer (school district or building personnel) would be unhappy with their participation. Since no permission is required from the schools unless the participant informs them him or herself, no school official would be aware of their participation. This makes it highly unlikely that any participant will experience any potential risk or discomfort.

Benefits

Often the opportunity for self-reflection on one’s teaching practice is found to be a valuable asset to teachers. Having an opportunity to share their pedagogical belief systems and practice could be a positive experience for the participants.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews provided a means for participants to tell their stories allowing for a more complete understanding of their experiences as democratic teachers. Semi-structured interviews are a crucial element of this project’s narrative research design. At the beginning of the semi-structured interview I spent time developing a rapport with the participants as a base for beginning the interview process. That time
helped me develop a conversational tone with the participants. For Rubin and Rubin (2005) the idea of “conversational partners” helps define my understanding of the semi-structured interview. It was my hope that the open ended, semi-structured nature of the interview questions encouraged the participants to go into a depth of response about their experiences as democratic educators. Rubin and Rubin argue that “depth of understanding” is an important element for researchers engaged in exploring complex topics (p. 35). For these researchers,

The goal of responsive interviewing is a solid, deep understanding of what is being studied, rather than breadth. Depth is achieved by going after context; dealing with the complexity of multiple, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting themes; and paying attention to the specifics of meanings, situations, and history. (p. 35)

The ability to understand the conceptualizations and informed practices of democratic teachers in Appalachian rural schools hinged on my ability to interview these teachers effectively. A narrative interview process allowed for effective development of categorical themes and thick description related to democratic educational practice and how these teachers have persevered in their democratic practices in the classroom. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 participants.

Probes

By utilizing probes in conjunction with the interview questions (see Appendix E) I increased the depth and richness of the narratives shared by this study’s participants. Probes allowed me the opportunity to maneuver within the interviews helping me better
control the follow of the interview. During the interviews I utilized both follow-up questions and probes to elicit more in-depth responses to certain questions.

Michael Patton (2002) offers an understanding of the how, to and when of using probes during a qualitative interview. He notes,

Probes are used to deepen the response to a question, increase the richness and depth of the responses and give the interviewee about the level of response that is desired. (p. 372)

Patton recommends that probes be used in non-mechanical ways and that they should be “conversational, offered in a natural style and voice...” (p. 372).

Patton offers three types of probes that I will potentially use during my one-on-one interviews: “detail-orientated probes, elaboration probes and clarification probes” (pp. 372-374). For Patton “detail-orientated probes” are used to “fill in the blank spaces of a response” (p.372). Examples of detail-orientated probes include “When did that happen, who else was involved, where were you during that time, what was your involvement in that situation, how did that come about and where did that happen” (p. 373). For Patton, “elaboration probes” encourage the participant to continue talking about a specific area (p. 373). An example of this type of probe is “Could you say more about that?” (p. 373). Patton suggests that a “clarification probe” be used in an effort to more clearly understand the participant’s responses. He notes that, “it is best for the interviewer to convey the notion that the failure to understand is the fault of the interviewer and not the fault of the person being interviewed” (p. 374). Utilizing a variety of techniques enabled me to elicit the most data during the semi-structured interviews.
Data Analysis

Multiple Case Analysis

I began my data analysis by reviewing the verbatim transcribed semi-structured interviews and identifying emergent themes. Once I organized the data into rudimentary thematic categories I worked to, “Build toward Narratives and Descriptions” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 224). Specifically, for Rubin and Rubin this means arranging the data into “topical markers” that will more fully allow me to “combine what different interviewees have said about the same concepts” (p. 224). Creswell (1998), states that the “researcher seeks a collection of instances from data, hoping that issue-relevant meanings will emerge” (p. 154). This process allowed me to make “direct interpretations” resulting in larger themes (p.154).

Following the work of Michael Patton (2002) I first completed an individual case analysis of each participant interviewed. I used the Qualitative Data Analysis program “Weft QDA” for this purpose. For Patton, “the analyst’s first and foremost responsibility consists of doing justice to each case. All else depends on that” (p. 448). Utilizing the verbatim transcribed interview for each participant I developed a case record for each teacher. Patton describes a case record as consisting of all the major information that will be used in doing the final case analysis and writing the case study. Information is edited, redundancies are sorted out, parts are fitted together, and the case record organized for ready access…topically. (p. 449)

After the individual case data was organized, coded and emergent themes identified I utilized the individual cases to create a cross-case analysis. Patton refers to this process as
“layering” or “nesting” (p. 447). He notes that “... layering recognizes that you can always build larger case units out of smaller ones; that is, you can always combine studies of individuals into studies of a program. . . ” (p. 447). I utilized emergent data from individual cases and categorical themes developed inside the individual cases as the primary vehicle for data presentation in chapter four and my analysis of the data in chapter five.
CHAPTER FOUR: TEACHER VOICES, TEACHER NARRATIVES

Introduction

This research study includes elements of a Narrative Inquiry, a multiple Case Study and an Appreciative Inquiry. As such the study was primarily concerned with the collection of teacher narratives, as detailed in the previous chapter. In addition, this work remained focused on the narratives of the eleven self identified democratic teachers found in this chapter and positions their stories inside an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) framework.

As Appreciative Inquiry scholars Barret and Fry (2005) argue when people “share their peak experiences or moments of magnified meaning, the narratives take on the character of sacred stories that carry cultural meanings” (p. 49). For these scholars “sacred” is not used in the religious sense, but to remind us that when people “tell one another stories that are deeply valued, durable, and persistent . . . these stories become powerful resources to draw upon when needed” (p. 49). As the researcher I deeply value the narratives of the teachers found in this chapter. I believe that when listening carefully to their voices the stories found in these pages are “sacred.”

Because this study is primarily a Narrative Inquiry it is important to understand that “a person’s experience needs to be listened to on its own terms first, without the presumption of deficit or flaw. Critique of that experience needs to be motivated by the problematic elements within that experience” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 62). In addition, “narrative inquiry is the turn from number to word data” (p. 15). As such, this research study helps to “reveal deep understandings about human interactions” as found in the “words” of the democratic teachers who shared their stories (p. 18).
Finally, the individual narratives found in this study represent the study’s “unit of analysis” (Patton, 2002, p. 228). For Patton “often individual people, clients, or students are the units of analysis” (p. 28). He argues that,

This means that the primary focus of data collection will be on what is happening to individuals in a setting and how individuals are affected by the setting.

Individual case studies and variation across individuals would focus the analysis. (p. 228).

In this sense the individual narratives form the basis of the multiple case or cross-case analysis found in chapter five. However, before an analysis is presented Patton argues that, “the analyst’s first and foremost responsibility consists of doing justice to each individual case. All else depends on that” (p. 449). This chapter is an attempt to “listen” to the experiences of the democratic teachers found on its pages, “all else” including the later cross-case analysis of their individual narratives, as presented in chapter five, depended on this effort.

Most all of the teachers I interviewed have taught in rural Appalachian Ohio for more than twenty five years. Only one of the eleven teachers I interviewed is originally from Appalachia. However, all of these teachers have remained in rural Appalachian Ohio and have made a career commitment to remain in the often underfunded schools found in this region. Their commitment to Appalachia and the students of this region was of particular interest to me as a researcher and helped inform my research questions.

Included in the individual case reports is a brief teaching history of each respondent. This teaching history offers a more complete look at each teacher, their teaching experiences and their educational backgrounds.
The eleven cases presented in this chapter are ordered by their place in the interviewing process starting with the first interview conducted and ending with the last interview conducted. There was no intentional ordering of the interviews; the order was determined by the availability of the participants. In this way no single narrative was held in more regard than another. All of these narratives represent the important and informative experiences of self defined democratic teachers working in rural Appalachian Ohio.
Sally

Sally has worked with elementary-aged students throughout most of her teaching career. She has been a classroom teacher for more than thirty years working with 8th graders in a rural school district in Southeastern Ohio. After a frustrating first year in teaching, Sally left the profession with a promise to herself to never teach again. After a year away from teaching and at the strong encouragement of a principal from a neighboring elementary school she returned to the classroom. Over thirty years later, she finds herself teaching in the same district and in the same school. She currently has a specialization in reading and literacy.

Sally is one of the founding members of the “Friday Roundtable” group and she has remained committed to democratic education for the majority of her career. Sally has an appreciation for democratic education and its potential to help students develop a sense of ownership regarding their educational journey. As she shared her teaching story with me several themes emerged. The themes found in her story include idealism, trusting and being kind to children, administrators, owning your educational experiences, involving students in the life of the school, the test, Appalachia and her strengths as a democratic teacher.

*What is Democratic Education?*

Contextually it is important to understand how Sally understands democratic education. She initially stated that, “I don’t think I can do a good summary [of democratic education] because for me it is always changing too.” However, as she talked about her position several salient points emerged,
I think it has to do with making students realize that they are in charge of their own education and [as the teacher] you are the sage on the side, the guy that is helping, but you are not the one that knows what is right for this kid. You can help them; you can make some judgments about handing them books. I think as a first-grade reading teacher, I know how to teach reading. But that is not the important, the most important thing. The most important thing is that they figure out why they want to be reading and that they were in charge of their learning all along.

As a teacher Sally employees the philosophy of helping children learn to be “in charge of their learning.” As Sally explained how she engages children in this practice, a sense of purpose sounded in her voice,

When I am working with a little first-grader and I am saying, “What did you do last time that worked so well when you got stuck?” And they say, “Oh I thought about this story and I put my finger under it and I tried the first part.” [I tell them] Yea, that is exactly right so you can do that on every part now. So that they [students] are building the feeling “I can learn how to do this, I can be more independent with it [my learning] and I can take it where I want it to go.”

Sally teaches from a democratic place because she believes it is the best way to help kids learn and she wants people to know that they can change the world, these two things influence her praxis. In her words she continues to teach democratically for two reasons. Sally said,

One is the personal satisfaction of the learning, but the other one is that I want all of those kids to go out and change the world. I want them to feel like they can do
that. And whatever that means to them, I want it to be more than just for them and their family and their neighborhood. I want it to reach out there because it needs to be changed.

As Sally told her teaching story, I began to understand just how she has empowered students to see themselves as change agents.

_Idealism_

Sally did not go to her undergraduate institution to become a teacher. In actuality her pre-collegiate education did not empower her to see herself as someone who could use education to create change in others. For her the K-12 educational experience in a “large and impressive” Catholic school was uninspiring. As she graduated from high school and entered college she did so as an undecided student. As a result she explored several academic disciplines in college “I was a Sociology major. I was an English major. I did whatever just looked interesting.” As she spoke about these early experiences an unforced smile developed as she talked about how she discovered teaching and the promise it holds; the opportunity to impact the lives of children. She shared this story, Jonathan Kozol spoke [at my undergraduate university] and I didn’t really know who he was but I lived across the way in [a dorm] and went to whatever lecture sounded good. He changed my mind. He really talked about this wave of reform that was going to happen and that schools were going to be so much more child-centered. And he spoke of the beauty of that. So I got myself down to [the College of Education] and decided I was going to catch that wave of reform. And once I had done that, I realized it [the wave of reform] hadn’t quite reached [the College of Education] in the way that maybe I had hoped.
Her desire to be part of a reform movement in education did not occur during her teacher preparation program. Sally noted that,

I had a decent student teaching experience. But the teacher that I was with was not progressive. But she was kind and I think I learned a life lesson that maybe the bottom line is being kind to children is the first thing.

I will return to Sally’s “life lesson of kindness” shortly, but for now the realities of her first year as a teacher caused Sally to reconsider her decision to become a classroom teacher.

**Idealism Lost**

Sally’s first teaching position was in a rural school district in Southeastern Ohio. Historically, this county-wide system finds itself among the poorest in the state. As Sally tells the story of her first year as a teacher it is hard to believe that she actually spent over thirty years in the same small rural school district. At the end of her first year she stopped teaching.

As she started her first job, Sally was hired as a reading specialist; she learned that she would have a self-contained eighth grade class. She explained how her class roster was developed,

They took seventh and eighth graders that didn’t qualify for special education; they called it at that time, but weren’t doing it well. And they literally gave them one teacher. I had the eighth graders, somebody else had the seventh graders, we were put in a building behind the rest of the school, and said we are on our own. So the good part was we were on our own and we really could do whatever we
wanted. Around October I remember the principal coming to me and saying that I needed to start coming to staff meetings and I said “I didn’t know there were staff meetings.” And he said “well I put notices in your mailbox” and I said “I didn’t know I had a mailbox.”

As she talked about her experiences it was clear to me that the lack of inclusion in the school both for her students and her own professional well being was unacceptable to her. However, Sally’s personal and professional ethics were further disturbed by her understanding of why she was assigned these particular children. After thirty years the pain in her voice is still present, I mean, I really was isolated out there, which was a really kind of a neat way to start teaching because nobody was breathing down your neck and basically they didn’t care about these kids. I had one fellow and I still remember his name Donny Pennington [a pseudonym], and his disability was being black. That’s it. I mean, they didn’t identify him as that, but that is the only thing I could see. I had one girl who had seizures and I just think they did not know what to do with her and she . . . I don’t know. They gave her to me. But there was no learning disability there.

It was visibly difficult for Sally as she shared this story. Both anger and frustration seasoned the telling. Tragically many children in this district were being treated in this way. However, despite the obvious racism and discrimination inherent in her first school district Sally continued to teach her students. She said,
I loved those kids. They were great. I mean they even came to my house on Saturday morning. Donny Pennington mowed my lawn with me and we managed to get through a lot of learning I think.”

At the end of her first year as a teacher after working in school conditions that were “pretty ruthless and very backward,” including having the students she worked with forced to use “antiquated textbooks” and more troubling being subjected to racism and discrimination, Sally quit teaching, “forever.”

*I Quit Forever*

At the end of the year, her first year as a teacher, Sally decided not to return to teaching. In the following story she explains her decision,

I quit forever and that was really funny because when I quit, not only did I go in to tell the Superintendent that I was quitting, but my husband came with me to tell him that we were both quitting. So we moved to Cape Cod for a year and I didn’t teach. And my parents, of course, were pretty upset with me…And then we decided to come back to [the region]. And so I thought, I need to earn a living. So I am going to get on the sub list because that could be kind of fun, me getting to drop in and drop out. But I did not have to be a part of a [school] system that I wasn’t really intrigued with. So [the principal] from [a local] elementary school, about two nights before school started, called me up and said he wanted to interview me for a fifth grade position. And I said, “No, no, no, I am just on the sub list.” And he said, “Well, I really need a full-time, one-year only.” So he came over to my house . . . we had just moved back and I remember I was painting and
we sat on paint cans. I mean I didn’t even take this interview too seriously because I didn’t really care.

While her decision to return to the classroom may have been based on the subjective nature of her circumstances, Sally soon found herself in a school environment that helped her clarify her teaching philosophy and led to embracing teaching as her profession.

*New Start: Be Kind to Kids, Trust Kids*

As Sally moved into her second teaching position she remembers the “place” of this school. She clearly found that her new school was different from her old school. She explained this difference,

…and I will always remember that I thought, “I am in a different place than I was at [the other county school].” The principal thought that the kids would be on my side and that we would be working together. [The relationships between teachers and students] wasn’t adversarial [like it was at the previous school]. [For example] “Don’t let them know that you are new here and that you don’t know what you are doing here.”

It was this reality. The reality that the kids were actually partners in the process of their education helped change her understanding of what education can be and how education can feel right in practice. She explained that her new principal,

Talked me into teaching at [a different elementary school] that year because I felt like he really did have something different going on at [this school]. And I could tell this because he would say things like, “What didn’t you like at [the other school], why did you quit?” and when I would tell him the things [and] he wasn’t shocked. He felt like yes that was, you know, it was awful; my experiences
weren’t good for kids. When he gave me a tour of the school … and this was really close before school started and all of the opening day meetings had already happened and stuff, I said, “I don’t even know where the bathrooms are.” And he said, “Ask the kids, tell them you are new, and they will help you.”

In this moment of our conversation I saw the teacher that Sally had developed into through her many years in the classroom, a teacher who was willing to listen to children, to be vulnerable to them, someone who truly valued the knowledge that children bring to the classroom. She talked more about these important and influential principles,

You know, he was right they were good kids; they are open because they loved to help. He also had a really good sense I think of so many kids at [our elementary school] that don’t have many possessions or status in the community but want to help or want to feel important. They want to be important, not just feel important…and to actually help this new person in the building was a very real thing and he knew that if I opened myself up to them, that they wouldn’t take advantage, they would actually help me and feel good about it. And that is how we went through the year.

In saying “and that is how we went through the year” Sally described her teaching as a partnership between her and her students. In addition, she was helping me understand the influence that onsite administrators can have on the educational climate of a school.

Administrators

Sally has remained a teacher at this elementary school in Appalachian Ohio and has taught in the same building for over thirty years. From her perspective administrators
have a tremendous effect on educational practice and ultimately how a classroom teacher engages in the craft of teaching.

*The Good Ones Really are Helpful*

Sally discussed the positive impact her new principal had on her thinking and actions in and out of the classroom. She described her initial frustration with him as an administrator and later how she developed an understanding that he was trying to help her “own” her teaching experiences, supporting the concept of “teacher ownership.” She shared the following story,

I attribute so much to him . . . he was the principal and in the beginning I would sometimes get mad at him. For example, we wanted to take our kids camping at [a local camp] and it is this place in [a town about 25 miles from the school] and you can rent this lodge and it required raising a lot of money and doing a lot of organizing and we wanted “our principal” to help us. And we felt like he wasn’t helping at all although he said we could do it and we were the only school at the time doing it. Now most of the schools do. And so although he said yes, he didn’t know how to raise the money and you know he would say things like “well here are some possibilities” but he didn’t help us the way I thought. And I remember being mad at him and saying to my husband, “I am busy teaching these kids. He could go figure out how to sell the candy bars or he could you know take care of the money.” He [the principal] deliberately didn’t and I have come to realize, because the more we did, the more we owned it and nobody was going to take it away from us . . . In fact when the district wasn’t so sure they wanted us to still do
this, we really fought for it and he fought for it with us and we were able to keep it, but he really believed in that teacher ownership.

As she talked about his influence on how the school operated it became clear that his administrative practice or philosophy greatly influenced all areas of the school’s practices including how new teachers were hired. Sally shared,

Other times we would be interviewing new teachers. He always let teachers interview teachers. We might say something and afterwards [For example] I would say I don’t really agree with that math program that she is talking about and [he] would say, “Oh, I don’t make those kinds of judgments. I am just glad that person has this strong idea, the thing they really want to do, that they are very excited about. I don’t decide whether it is with my philosophy or not.” He didn’t ever let you know what his real philosophy of education was. But he allowed you to pursue yours and he encouraged you to be passionate about it.

Sally’s passion for language and reading led her to explore the question of “how can I better teach children the skills they need to read and read critically?” It was her conviction to be a better teacher that led her to re-think how literacy education was happening at her school. She shared how her new principal’s influence as an administrator who valued her judgment helped to impact her practice,

He always encouraged us to really pursue all we believed in . . . I used to want him to come to the Friday Roundtables and he said, “No, I don’t put my stamp of approval on anything.” You all have to figure that out. And in the end I think he felt very strongly about the things we were doing, which he was really [supportive
of and] if he were a teacher he would be teaching like we were. But as the Principal, he didn’t feel like that was his role.

So, as some of the teachers in his school pushed for a moment toward whole language as the primary literacy pedagogy he encouraged them. Sally explains what whole language means,

We were at that time switching to whole language. And it is real literature. We used to have these fake books you know that somebody wrote to help kids learn to read, but it wasn’t real kid’s literature. So, anyway, there was all this controversy you know for twenty years there have probably been wars [about this subject] and he would never take a stand on how his thoughts about how reading should be taught.

For Sally, school administrators can also have a negative impact. When I asked her about this a strained look came over face, as if she had been in too many encounters with administrators that demanded so much of her teacher energy. She said, “Our school really changed direction [after a new principle was hired] . . . I would have never thought that the principal would have been that important.” I asked Sally, “So, the administrator is pretty important” and she quickly replied “Unfortunately.” Arguably “Unfortunately,” is not the most powerful word. However, Sally said it in conjunction with her body, her voice and posture both sagging as if deflated by this reality.

Less Than Democratic Administrators Can be Harmful

As Sally continued her story we reached a point in her career where she was very active in the Friday Round Table meetings and in the formation of The Institute for
Democracy (IDE). During this time her school made several moves to become more
democratic including increasing the voice of students in relation to the “happenings at
school” (I will explore this in more detail in the following section). However, as she
talked about working with new building administrators, after the retirement of the
principal who hired her, it became clear that a democratic education was not embraced by
many of the teachers in her school or by the administrators in her district. She explained
the problems that followed as new school administrators moved in,

And our next administrator was fine and we were all good for the two years he
was there and then we got someone new. She was hired, we have been told by one
of the school board members, to clean up the “snake pit” at our school. That was
the exact phrase and I believe that was true. She was hired to shut us up and put
us back on what the district thought was the right track and I would say she was
pretty successful.

Successfully squelching the democratic sprits of the democratic teachers in the building
(a.k.a. “the snakes”) was not an easy task for the new principal. For me the question was,
“Could Sally remain democratic under the direction of this undemocratic administrator?”
Her answer was a quick, “Yes.” She explained how her democratic practice changed in
order to survive in this new system without compromising her democratic values,

If you were established there and you felt strong about it, you could close your
doors and teach the way you wanted and you know we have always read books
about teachers that make kids look right . . . If you are quiet in the hall and you
make a line and you look like you are traditional, the principal is going to let us
do what we want.
Sally initially talked about this forced reality in a general way referring to “teachers” and “students” as actors in a play; however, in short order she began to describe her own experiences, “I made those kinds of calls in my room. I would say it is a lot more like that right now. But I don’t see many teachers at our school right now even pulling for it (democratic education).” The strong emotions rekindled in her story regarding being called a member of a “snake pit” because of the strong convictions she holds about democratic education revealed the depth of Sally’s commitment to a democratic way of teaching and being in schools. In spite of an administrator’s wish for compliance, Sally did not let go of the determination to be democratic with her students. Sally understood the potential found in democratic education both as a philosophical position and as praxis in action.

Own Your Experiences

For Sally it is important that students understand that they own their educational experience. She tries to help students find meaning and purpose in her classroom. Sally shared a story about a time in her career when she felt that she was very successful at this process: the process of fully engaging and involving students. By “fully” I mean that she not only had students involved in their academic work but also involved as a member of the classroom community. This was accomplished through what she called “multi-age classrooms” which for her “are so much more democratic.” Sally explained that multi-age classrooms combine two grades into one class (e.g., 1st and 2nd grades or 2nd and 3rd grades). For her this approach was democratic in that it helped children develop at their own pace by encouraging the child to progress in weaker areas and celebrate their
strengths in others. As she explained this process, I began to more completely understand the intentionality of her democratic teaching. Sally shared that in multi-age classrooms,

Every kid has a chance to be a leader. Every kid has a chance to be the [best at something or] the beginning one. You know when you have the lowest kid in [your] room and they never feel like they know anything it can be difficult for them. [So, in a multi-age classroom] the year that they are a second grader and the new first graders come in, they know a lot. And they are able to help [the younger students]. And they get this feeling, [an understanding that] I do know things.

The success of this approach for her students in part made the loss of the multi-age classrooms structure harder for Sally. Regrettably for her, significant changes at the school were made in an effort to accommodate the mandated high-stakes testing curriculum. As Sally talked about the schools movement away from multi-age classrooms she focused in on the impact these decisions had on her ability to teach. She lamented,

Well anyway they ended up taking that away from us after doing what I felt was about four very successful years because they said that multi-age, for example, science and social studies, you can’t teach two years’ worth, you know. And we don’t think it is about teaching the plan that is one year and teaching, you know, animal life one year and magnets one year, and. It is not about the subject matter but the board [the school board] said it was because that is the stuff that is on the test.

As state mandated high-stakes testing limited the pedagogical choices she was able to make as a professional teacher, Sally struggled to remain democratic in her practice while
at the same time acted to serve the needs of the mandatory high-stakes testing culture by preparing students to answer its questions correctly.

The Test

The reality of Sally’s experience in relation to the test (i.e., the high-stakes standardized test given to all students in Ohio) stands in contrast to her core beliefs about the potential for empowerment found inside the process of teaching from a democratic place. This created a dilemma, for her as a democratic teacher,

I mean there is only so much you can do. When they say you have to do these tests. There they are and then you realize by not teaching to the test year after year, your school is you know getting more oppressive because the tests are low and when you bring the scores up a couple of points, they let you alone for a while. It is horrible. And I don’t think when No Child Left Behind came out, only a few were really skeptical and a lot of the few were the people who knew. There isn’t a teacher that I know that doesn’t want that thing to go away.

Sally played the “high stakes testing game” while refusing to lose her democratic educational core in the area of literacy instruction.

As Sally shared her understandings about the impact of the “tests” she talked about the powerful potential for change she found in teaching students to learn to read from a democratic place. For her “whole language is very empowering and very democratic.” As she taught children to read through a whole language process Sally stated, “I realized it is really kids taking ownership of the process. For her,

[Whole language] is more stories based and focused on the importance of the book or the piece of literature that you are reading. Now, you know when you are
doing a book, of course, you still have to learn sounds and letters. But it doesn’t
come from that small bit. It comes from reading lots of stories to kids and having
them get involved with that more than the short and long vowels.

By teaching literacy from a whole language perspective, Sally asked her students to see
the larger relationships found in the books and stories that they read. Similarly as a
democratic teacher she encouraged her students to participate as community members in
both their classroom communities and their larger school community

_Involving the Kids in the Life of the School_

In Sally’s classroom the children are part of the creation of the classroom rules.

By involving her students in this way Sally empowered them to deeply understand their
classroom’s community standards. In doing so, the students not only agreed to live by the
classroom rules, the very rules that they have created, they also begin to understand how
they can better hold each other accountable when the rules are not followed. This style of
classroom management is different from traditional approaches to classroom
management. Sally explains,

Assertive discipline was so basic and they were teaching it. We had workshops on
it. And basically the teacher stands up and says this is my classroom and here are
the four or five simple rules that you’re going to follow so that we can have a safe
environment and get this learning underway. But it was a definite, “this is my
classroom” and here are the rules that you will follow as opposed the . . . first
days where you sit down and you say now you know we are a community of
learners, what are some agreements that we need and each week you are revising
the agreement. And with the little kids it was pretty funny because you know I
mean they would make up these rules and then they would want to amend them
the next week and you know sometimes they would want to be real detailed on
how many can be on the slide and with dabbling with their own, they were trying
to figure out how you do this thing because I’m telling you in college right now
when I have these juniors, I feel like they have not had a democratic education.
And so when I say things like, “What do you want to do to make this project real
for you?” they are constantly saying “what do we have to do, how many pages,
how many points, what does it do”, because they haven’t had this.

Sally agreed that teaching people to manage themselves is important, but she firmly
believes that helping people have a voice in this process produces better citizens.

For Sally having students involved in helping change the world is a key premise
of democratic education. For her this starts in the classroom, but she also wants students
to take these skills to the next level of their immediate community: their school. She
shared a story of how this happened at her school,

We used to have this thing called “primary forums” at [our elementary school] in
the kindergarten, first and second grades and we would all [teachers, students and
administrators] get together in the cafeteria or the library and ask them [the
students] what problems were happening. And they would. I remember one year
it was they [the students] wanted a water fountain out on the playground.

Sally shared the idea of the “primary forums” with a profound sense of hope, as if she
could actually see these young students eventually participating in the debates of the
United States Congress or as members of the United Nations. Regrettably for these
students their participation and voice was to be utilized in a different fashion. Sally, with a shake of her head, explained that the whole thing [the primary-forum] has now deteriorated into a sing-along and the sing-along is sweet. They have a good time and we have this wonderful teacher with a beautiful voice and a guitar, but that is not what it was supposed to be about.

“It is not what it supposed to be” might be a summation of Sally’s teaching experience. As a teacher she has seen the success of being as “democratic as I can stand to be” and the academic and social success this brought to her students.

*Appalachia*

Sally has spent all of her professional teaching career working in Rural Appalachian Ohio. She has seen teachers both embrace the students of this region of Ohio and others who flee from the school, citing regional factors (e.g., poverty, backwardness). Sally explains,

Well, we find teachers at [our school] generally stay if they like it and they leave if they don’t. Because you either appreciate these kids or you don’t understand them and you leave. In real life, teachers just stay because they think, hands down, that we have appreciative kids. But they don’t walk in respecting you and I respect that about them. A lot of adults in their lives have let them down or have been pretty ruthless to them. And that is, you know a generalization and there are obviously many wonderful families. But they tend to hear the commands more than the conversation. We talk about this with language development a lot. They
come to us with not a lot of give and take. They don’t have book language. What they tend to hear is “Turn off the TV, eat this, go to bed.”

As Sally talks about the children of Appalachian Ohio, the very children she finds in her classroom every day, the accomplishment of understanding her students and not judging them for their often perceived deficiencies is important to her. Sally notes,

Our kids . . . have learned to sit down and shut up. And they don’t necessarily like adults. I think they love their parents because they are their parents. But they don’t look at us as being necessarily fair or anything. They kind of walk in like there is just this big person and you have to win them over pretty quickly. And I find that really perfect. I mean that is how we should all be. We shouldn’t just assume that this person is there for my benefit. You know, you have to be a pretty good teacher [to gain their trust]. And [once this happens] then they are amazing. They really do appreciate and see [me as someone who is here to help them learn]. They love those conversations, the fact that somebody will listen to them. And sometimes I feel like I don’t need to, you know, slam the culture. But our [the students’] parents are [often] overwhelmed. Many of them are working more than one job, some horrible low-paying job in the middle of the night. They are running, you know, to work at Wal-mart at night, trying to get their kids in bed, or get their kids to their sister’s house or, you know, they’re very hard working folks that aren’t getting ahead. And all of the stress of that, they don’t have time for much more than go to bed now. I mean they don’t have the energy for it.
Sally was thoughtful as she offered her understanding of Appalachian Ohio to me. It was as if she was trying to comprehend the magnitude of the struggle between poverty and education in relation to the experiences of her students.

*My Strength as a Democratic Teacher: I Get It*

I asked Sally to share what she most appreciated about herself as a democratic teacher. This was difficult for her. It was as if I had asked her to let me help her with a task that she had never considered needing help with in the past. After a moment of contemplation she said,

I am not the best student. I am not the most articulate person in my building. But I get democratic education and I get why we are supposed to have it and what it does for a community of loners. [I understand] what it could do for this whole country if we could all become empowered. It floors me that smarter people than me don’t get it [the immense potential to be found in democratic education]. And then I think maybe I do get it and they just don’t want it. They don’t want everybody to be smart because they are holding the cards. [Because] when they [people in power] are the only smart ones then they hold the power. [I believe that,] they really do not want these kids [these kids form Appalachia] to be smart. And so I think that they [people with power to lose] know the value in current order. [And they want] to keep certain classes down and to keep certain people just scrambling so that other people can manipulate it all. It has taken me awhile to get vigilant about this. But I think that’s what the bottom line really is; some people want to hang on to all of the power and they really don’t want us [teachers] empowering [students from outside of this order] these days.
Sally’s strength is not only that she understands the tremendous potential that democratic educational practice holds in relation to empowering students, but that she has spent her teaching career trying to empower students as a democratic teacher.
Linda

Linda retired from a small school district in Southeastern Ohio several years ago as a primary-age elementary school teacher. She was a founding member of the Friday Roundtables. She identifies herself as a democratic teacher. I asked Linda if she thinks of herself as a democratic teacher she answered without hesitation, “Yes, absolutely.” Linda currently teaches abroad and our conversation coincided with her winter break. In the midst of visiting family and friends Linda made time to meet with me. She was excited to share her experiences as a long-practicing democratic teacher. During our conversation several themes emerged: teacher support/empowerment, democratic education, action, the test, what I value about me, three hopes for democratic education and a story “Finding the Roundtable in Europe.”

Teacher Empowerment

Linda shared her experiences as a member of the Friday Roundtable group and as a teacher working in a school with traditional teachers who were cruelly critical of the roundtable. She repeatedly talked about support and made careful note of the impact her Roundtable experience had on her teaching praxis. For her, the Roundtables offered a place of support and encouragement as she and her fellow Roundtable teachers worked to put their discussions to practical action. As she explained her feelings about the group’s high level of support for each other, her voice drifted back to the immense struggle to be and remain a democratic teacher in a school where most teachers were traditional. These more traditional teachers did not always support the Linda’s democratic practices. She said,
At a certain point [we] used to talk about pioneers [must] take a lot of arrows and that was our motto [we are going to take a lot of arrows] . . . we thought OK now we know that this is going to happen [traditional teachers criticizing these democratic teachers]. [We knew] it wasn’t going to be “Oh yeah good for you and your new plan, let’s follow what you all are doing.”

As Linda shared her story of the traditional teachers criticizing the Roundtable teachers the relief of having other Roundtable teachers supporting her became clearer.

For Linda the supportive nature of the Roundtable meetings helped her gain confidence in her own thinking about education. She started to see her own democratic educational practice as the most effective way to reach students. She shared,

[The Roundtables were happening] right at the time that the crest of a whole language was coming in and that’s what we felt was the right way to teach reading and writing. So we were pretty justified at that point because Donald Graves came in with his theory of writing and Don Haldaway was talking about reading and Dorothy Stricklen and they were all talking about what we were believing. So, we felt like OK even the theory is behind us right.

Even after retiring from her teaching job in rural Southeastern Ohio and having taught abroad for more than a few years, Linda still became animated and excited by the group’s ability to tie democratic educational theory to their democratic educational practice.

For Linda many of the teachers who participated in the Roundtable became lifelong friends. As if understanding this for the first time she said,
it’s funny that these women are still some of my very best friends although we’re spread out, you know I think it was that spirit . . . that conviction of what was correct [democratic education] all those years ago.

As she talked about these women she clearly knew where they were in the world (“she’s in New York” or “she is in Europe). Linda fondly remembered how she and several of the Roundtable teachers taught together in the same school, “It was easy for us to support each other [in our democratic practice] we were also easy to say, “Hey, come here; see what happened. I just did—this really worked.”

As Linda’s memory drifted back to the time of her participation on the Friday Roundtable she spoke of how the group often discussed elements of democratic educational practice in the theoretical and then applied it in their classrooms. This application was done while members of the Roundtable simultaneously provided support for each other’s efforts. She shared,

Oh yea, we used to, that’s a huge conversation within the group. Once we had talk about an idea and then we would try it and we would support one another and then we would talk about what other people are looking at us and talking about us at school. We talked a lot about supporting one another so we could carry on and just doing in your classroom for what you do you know it’s right and it’s good for kids. We used to say it’s not good and bad, it’s right . . . So, we were able to support one another. Of course, there were three of us in our school while other people were singular in their school. You know they didn’t have another mate that was attending on Friday afternoon and it was a little bit harder for them.
For Linda, the important place the Roundtable served in relation to supporting the application of concepts to practice was an important benefit of membership in the group.

**Being Professional**

Linda noted that the support and empowerment of the Roundtable helped her realize the importance of her job. She stated that,

> I think when we started these Friday afternoons it really gave us an opportunity to think [about our work]. We felt really professional—that we were talking about teaching. We were talking about education. We were making our job [as teachers] really important.

Linda gave so much of herself to the work of understanding how to teach better that it helped to elevate her self-understanding of what a democratic teacher could look like in a democratic classroom.

As she continued talking about the importance of her Roundtable experience she stopped and said (as if this action was out of the ordinary for teachers),

> And we read together . . . I think that might have been one of our important [pause]. . . And we did start reading books together, too, you know, that was fun that we read together. And I think that greatly influenced me [this process of learning] that the *experience of education* is what’s really important.

As she shared the story of her Roundtable participation she became more reflective. As part of her reaction to the telling of her experiences, Linda started to talk about the important role the Roundtable played in helping her develop the capacity to be a reflective educator.
Reflection

With a look of sincere disappointment she said, “I think that was a big thing because we were never, ever, ever asked before [the Roundtables] to reflect on our practice.” It was the lack of being asked to think about her teaching prior to the Roundtables that seemed to give Linda pause. She later continued,

You just kind of did one day and moved forward, moved forward and we never were looking back [we never asked], did that work? Or was the right? Or where did that take us? Or where did that take me? —we were not given reflective time. We weren’t given; we took it [as members of the Roundtable]. We made it happen.

As Linda said, “we made it happen” she nodded with satisfaction. For Linda, the Roundtables and the ideas exchanged on these long ago Friday afternoons shaped several important aspects of her life.

Developing a Life Philosophy

It is difficult to fully capture the essence of the moment when someone talks about how they solidified core elements of their persona through a meaningful life experience. For Linda, the Roundtable and her association with the teachers who made up this group had a profound effect on her life,

I think that this group [the Roundtable group] even more so than my [formal] education helped me sort out my lifetime values. It [Democracy] carries over into relationships with my husband, with my family, with my friends. Because [I think that] democracy extends past [the field of] education. It is how you feel about people.
Through the Roundtables Linda found herself not only as a democratic teacher, but as a democratic person.

Democratic Education

As the Friday Roundtable group continued to have its weekly discussions, Linda’s own understanding of the power of democratic education continued to develop. She noted that, “It wasn’t anything really radical [Democratic Education] but we realized maybe it was radical because teaching is a political activity.” She talked about how the group’s discussions facilitated her learning and influenced her thinking,

We talked long and hard about what was democratic education and for us it was, it was being respectful to the learner, it was matching the instruction to the developmental level, it was looking at what’s interesting for children, it was all about looking at the theory of learning and then turning it into practice.

Linda’s commitment to these core principles filtered and flowed through her work as a teacher.

Linda’s enthusiasm for teaching became more pronounced as she talked about her understanding of democratic education and her firm belief that democratic educational practice can have a profound impact on children’s learning. For her this teaching in a democratic way was the “right way of teaching.” She explained that it was the children in her classroom that helped her hold tightly to this position,

It’s the right way of teaching [democratically] and I think that that’s what drove us [the Friday Roundtable group] and we felt that we really were doing the right thing for kids.
Linda credits her commitment to teach from a democratic place as a primary reason she remained in the teaching profession.

With a tone of voice peppered by honesty she talked about her understanding of how formal teacher training differed from her Roundtable learning,

That’s how I stayed in my profession [because of the democratic work of the Roundtable] . . . once you get into the college of education it becomes all content and it’s not about what is the kid ready to learn, what’s their age, what’s appropriate for them, now it’s Math and it’s grade one, now it’s science and it’s grade one, now it’s social studies, now it’s prescribed.

As she developed a democratic teaching philosophy Linda also developed a determination to follow through, in her classroom, with the principles of democratic education as she understood them.

*Help Kids Develop a Desire to Learn*

The Roundtable experience and her development as a democratic teacher forced Linda to question the type of educational practices she witnessed on a daily basis in her school. Linda explained,

We [the Roundtable teachers] began to see that it [traditional education] was all content driven. It was all textbook driven. It was not at all interesting to children nor what is it what the kids were ready to learn. And I think that the basis for us coming together [in the beginning] was to ask, “How we can make this better for kids?” and “What is it that we can do to get them get the most out of here [their school]? We felt like if we instilled a love of learning, if we instilled an interest
in education, if we instilled the ability to read and to question, then that would lead them to be lifelong learners.

As Linda shared her hope of children becoming critical readers and lifelong learners, the seriousness of her commitment to this purpose caused her to move forward in her chair, her hands held close as if cradling a fragile ball of glass. She used this position to punctuate her point.

*Classroom Management*

As a democratic teacher Linda understands classroom management as a community process, and as such, she involved the whole class as they developed their community expectations. She shared,

I felt that the classroom management always came through class discussions. So, we sat down as a group even with grade one kids, we sat down and we talked about how this would work. There are 20 of us in the room—what would make it work for us? You know, and they [the students] would make the rule, what we would call rules, and they’d say we need to, and I always tried to ask them to say put it in a positive tone, what do we want to do. Not what not to do [for example] no running . . . [So] we weren’t allowed to say no. We were trying to saying what is it we can do to make this environment work for all of us.

Linda’s confidence in the children’s ability to help develop acceptable and useful classroom rules, rule that would “work for all of us,” was born out of the practical application of having children doing this work. She shared,

And they’re able to do that. Little people are able to do that you know. And we saw this video, I think it’s called “Starting Small” and it was all about kids saying
how they want their environment, their learning environment to be. So, then whenever something would go wrong, I would say “Halt!” in the middle of what was happening and I said we need to talk about this. So we’d group up, even if it was in kindergarten somebody knocked a building down . . . I’d say, “Come over here, I wanted everyone to see this . . . what happened here.” And then they had to talk about it . . . But then they get it. Then they understand it. When they have to talk to each other they become responsible for what happens in the classroom and it isn’t all about [me] making the rules here.

As a democratic teacher Linda developed the capacity to put her ideological understandings into meaningful and practical practice and for her this was the responsible way to teach.

*Our Responsibility: Do what is Right for Children*

Linda explained that the Roundtable’s sincere desire to “do what was right for the kids” was in part a reaction to their own parenting instincts and to the quality of relationships they developed in the community with parents and students. Linda notes that when the Roundtables were meeting several of the group’s members were parents. Linda, now a grandmother, explained this observation with a humble, but proud sense of wisdom,

And I was raising kids— Sally didn’t have kids then. Many of these other people did have kids . . . but I think we were also looking at [democratic education from the position of] what do we want for our kids [her children]; what kind of a classroom, what kind of teacher do I want for my child. So, it was really important to me to make sure that education could be correct for kids.
For Linda this personal conviction spilled over to community. She talked about the immense responsibility to teach the children of her school and to teach them well,

And you know when you work with kids and you’re with kids all day and you have 20 kids in a classroom you make incredible relationships with them and with their parents and there’s such a responsibility. We all felt huge responsibility. Especially at our elementary school because these are kids of really poverty stricken families.

As Linda shared her story she seemed to become flooded by the memories and the heaviness these responsibility laden memories pushed other thoughts forward. She began to talk of the incredible need for action that the Roundtable created in her as a teacher. 

*Action*

As Linda shared her democratic teaching story she noted several of the projects she and others in the Roundtables had worked on over the years to illustrate the democratic educational work they undertook. These projects or democratic actions revealed the depth of thought, commitment to principle and the strong desire to make a difference through democratic action held by Linda and the other Roundtable teachers. These projects included a rethinking of the way literacy was taught in her school including a decision to use multi-age or looped classrooms. As Linda talked about the genesis of these projects she was most celebratory over the changes in the literacy curriculum and the “looping” of classes.
As the Friday Roundtables continued to meet, the group began to grow both in numbers and purpose. Linda explained, “We would get an article and then we would meet on Friday usually at someone’s house, we went from house to house and we just talked about the article.” As the Friday Roundtable group’s enthusiasm for their work increased over the course of “one year and half or two years” the Roundtable began to develop in ways that Linda had not imagined at the beginning. Linda said of the Roundtable’s growth, “then it turned into let’s have a potluck. You know, oh let’s invite our spouses for the potluck, oh let’s have a summer institute, you know it just kept getting bigger.” At this point the Roundtable began to think of their summer teaching breaks as a time to accomplish action driven projects. Linda explained,

Well that summer we each had to have a project [the Roundtable members agreed to have a summer project] so [another teacher] Sally and I wrote a grant to get real books in classrooms instead of basil textbooks and we were awarded $25,000. [We used the money] to get books for our classrooms: Sally was grade one, I was what was called a transition between kindergarten and grade one where we kept kids who we felt weren’t ready for grade one. [The other teacher] was grade two, so . . . we got rid of all the basil programmed readers and used only real books. Linda called this “whole language instruction.” Her face was fully animated and she spoke with great excitement as she described their accomplishment. She described her “democratic dilemma” the Basil Readers and the curriculum that was designed to accompany them presented,

It was the textbooks that we had and it was the way we had to teach
[reading] ... is was all so boring. [We used these] Basil Reader textbooks and we had to go story by story and do the workbooks and we all started feeling ... so blaah.

Linda illustrated “blaah” both in her body motion and her facial expression as she shared the mood teaching from the Basil perspective invoked in her as a teacher.

As Linda talked about this time in her teaching career she offered an inspiring story of literacy success that came directly from the grant project,

My favorite story from that time and this is. . . (Linda stopped and paused thoughtfully before continuing). You know this is one of those things that I strongly believe [helped me know] that what we did was right. We had, at [our] elementary school a lot of parents that didn’t read. So these books were part of a take home program. The books went home every night with the children so they would read at school and they’d go home to read with their parents. So these books went home every night. And this mother came in at the very end of the school [year and] she said, “The very best thing happened this year my husband this year, he learned to read.”

Many years after the event the power and the magnitude of what it meant for this family resonated with Linda. She ended the story adding, “so you think [to yourself as a teacher] I am reaching a bigger, broader audience than the kids in [my] classroom” she quickly added “so that was when I felt that this is right.” With a hint of sarcasm Linda finished the story, “No one took a Basil book home and had their dad read it. You know how stupid those stories were!” She nodded “yes” in response to her question.
Multi-Age/Looping

Linda, Sally and other teachers worked together to develop a ‘Looping’ program at their elementary school. This program included combining two classes of different yearly designations. For example, a kindergarten class was combined with a first grade class or first and second grades became one class. The teachers asked parents about the decisions to ‘loop’ classes. Linda said, “We had double the teachers talking to parents and we gave questionnaires to our parents to make sure they [were supportive], because we [decided to] loop grades one to grade two, which we thought would be a great idea.” Linda seemed to be back in her looped classroom as she talked about the high parental support for this idea. However, Linda reminded me that even when teachers, administrators and parents think they have developed the right formula for how to best educate the children in their school, others may mandate a different structure.

The Test

At about the same time in her career as the literacy project and the looped classrooms Linda began to teach classes at the university in the teacher education program. She remembered the changes the college started to undergo as the state of Ohio began to change the curriculum in order to support the standardized testing movement.” Linda shared,

I started teaching in the college of education . . . and then they told us what courses we had to teach, when we had to teach them, and that they were blocking it so [a student] could major in science and social studies or science and math.
The change in curriculum in the college of education, based in part, on the expectations of the high-stakes standardized testing movement, impacted Linda’s work at her elementary school.

A Change in Practice

Linda’s frustration with the realities of working in the era of what would later become the formalized legislation known as “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) came to the surface as if she had just walked away from her classroom an hour before our meeting. She explained that the “test” did not tolerate the looping of grades, because the test could not fit her students into a single grade and therefore her students’ learning could not be judged against all others in the state.

This changed her elementary school. She explained that the high-stakes standardized testing movement meant that there “was no longer going to be self-contained classrooms” at her school. Linda lamented the implications this loss had for her and her students,

We could no longer have those beautiful conversations with kids and get to know them. [A culture in the school of high stakes standardized testing] meant that you’re going to be a science teacher; you’re going to be a math teacher. It was like breaking it all up, all the beautiful things that we [the Roundtable teachers] felt were right . . . I feel that [we] lost . . . I don’t have any other way to say it but we lost the art of teaching. There’s an art to working with people. And I feel like teachers aren’t able to use that now they’re so pressured by what they have to teach.
The weight of having lived through this experience, as a democratic teacher, showed heavily on Linda’s face, effectively breaking the enthusiasm she had exhibited earlier in our conversation about the movement to looped classrooms.

What I Value About Me

I asked Linda to share what she valued most about herself as a democratic teacher. She thoughtfully answered,

I try to make the [educational] situation the best for my students. I get to know the students . . . all the while knowing, [chuckle] I do have the information inside of me [and that] I could sit here and lecture at you but I want to work with the students. I need to find out what they need to know and what they know already and where we can go with this [their experiences]. And I feel like that’s what I do the best.

Linda spoke about this ability, the ability to help students understand and value their experiences as if she were an artisan trying to understand a canvas prior to applying pigment.

Three Hopes for Democratic Education

As our conversation ended Linda explained three hopes she had for the future of democratic educational practice in the K-12 environment. With a teacher’s mind Linda noted that she wanted more teachers to “understand democratic education.”

“Unfortunately,” she added,

I think a lot of people don’t really appreciate democracy in this country but living outside this country you get it. You understand what we have here. We have something
really beautiful. But it’s not being worked correctly right now. And that’s what I would wish if people would come back to why is it we even have public education.

Linda also hoped to see children treated better in schools. She has a “wish for people to think more respectfully about children.” She quickly added, “And especially teenagers in this country.” Linda explained that, “I think we treat children disrespectfully.” For her respect for children is a prerequisite for a democratic classroom. Finally, Linda said,

My [final] wish is collegiality ‘cause that’s how we [the Friday Roundtables] grew.
Gail

I interviewed Gail in her kindergarten classroom just after the end of the school day. She is a founding member of the Friday Roundtables and has taught in a rural Appalachian Ohio school for several decades. As we talked about her democratic teaching experiences, several themes emerged: her teaching history, her democratic teaching, her roundtable experiences, the friction she has experienced between herself and other more traditional teachers, her position on state educational standards, her experiences with high stakes standardized testing and what she most values about herself as a democratic teacher.

Gail’s Teaching History

Gail has been a teacher for more than thirty years and has spent most of her career teaching in rural Appalachian Ohio. She is currently a kindergarten teacher in a rural school district in Southeastern Ohio but was trained as a special education teacher. Reflectively, she shared why she became a special education teacher,

I actually started in special education, because when I got my degree in 1977... there were not many teaching jobs. There was a glut of teachers at that time. They just told me, “You’ll never get a job in regular education, so you should go into special education.”

Gail’s decision to become a special education teacher was not planned. In addition, her prior decision to become a teacher was also haphazard, “I was just kind of not very thoughtful about what I was doing, really. . . I couldn’t think of what else I wanted to do when I grew up.” Gail noted that “I sort of happened into it [teaching], but I really like working with children and really feel that it’s an important thing to do.” The child
friendly space of Gail’s room helped to punctuate her point. The room blossomed with the handiwork of her students: colorful student art, unsteady letters written with pencil and tables of various proudly displayed projects.

Gail has worked as a teacher in several states and different types of schools. She started teaching in the state where she grew-up. Gail stated, “I grew up in Illinois. I taught there for four years and one year in Colorado, and the rest of the time here [in rural Appalachian Ohio] except for two years [about 5 years ago] in Los Angeles.” As she talked about her career Gail shared how she became a democratic teacher. She said,

It really wasn’t until we came here that I was in a public school with regular kids, regularly developing kids. Being in the Appalachian area and with lots of poor kids, it was a different population than what I had grown up with, certainly, or worked with in Illinois. I think I just came to respect the families and the backgrounds of the kids, and that they weren’t all going to just walk in and easily learn in the middle class way, or top-down way. The group that started [the Friday Roundtables], those teachers had more experience than I did . . . They had been here for probably ten years longer than me. Not quite, maybe. I always thought they had way more experience than I was.

Gail’s work in Appalachian Ohio and her democratic educational philosophy was very different from her teaching experiences in Los Angeles. She described her school in Los Angeles as “affluent.” With a serious, secretive tone smattering of sarcasm she shared,

The people we were teaching with were so affluent. I tell people that, “We were really the hired help.” There [in L.A.], I felt like, “Anybody could do this.” You know, these kids had absolutely everything in the world. One teacher was just
[like] another—this sounds really bad, but I was just another person hired to serve the wealthy.

The sting of this class distinction seemed to linger with Gail. After a brief pause she continued to talk about her work in rural Appalachia. Gail became reenergized as she talked about teaching in her current school. She said,

Here, I’m the teacher that everyone [fellow teachers] think we just play all the time . . . [in L.A.] if I made a child unhappy, they went straight to their parents, and then the parents would—we started out really badly, and it got better as they developed some respect for what I was doing, and that I wasn’t a mean teacher.

Gail explained that “what” she was doing in Los Angeles was acting as a democratic teacher not being a democratic teacher.

Democratic Teacher: A Definition

Gail smiled as she responded to the question, “Do you define yourself as a democratic teacher?” For her the terms democratic, progressive and age appropriate are similar in meaning. Gail explained,

You know, so many of those terms kind of float around. Another term that has come into use a lot is developmentally appropriate . . . I think it would be hard to be a developmentally appropriate teacher and not be democratic, because it values the individual but it also really strives to be appropriate for that child’s age, so they kind of overlap a lot, I guess. They all go together, progressive; democratic. . . I would say I’m a developmentally appropriate teacher.

As Gail talked about her work as a “developmentally appropriate” teacher and how she came to identify herself in this manner the topic of the Friday Roundtables emerged.
For Gail the Roundtable meetings were an important and meaningful time in her development as a teacher. She talked about the importance of the Roundtable’s work in relation to teaching in Appalachian Ohio, the commitment the group members had to the group, the empowering nature of the Roundtables and the groups’ influence on her as a democratic teacher.

_A commitment_

Gail offered a story as an example of how committed the members of the group were to these Friday afternoon meetings. As she shared the following story Gail laughed as if she were astonished by her own commitment to the group,

My son is now 25, so he was just a little toddler during some of these years. I was actually in labor with my second son when we were at a talk one night. I remember Sally was sitting next to me going, “They’re about five minutes apart, right?” I thought I was being real sneaky here with the contractions. So yeah, we had little kids [and they came with us]. I mean we were really committed to getting together. I mean, I think a lot of that was the personalities of those teachers; they needed to . . . stick together and figure it out [democratic education].

A strong desire to “stick together and figure it out [democratic education]” was partially the result of the group’s belief that what they were trying to accomplish was in the best interests of children, especially the children of rural Appalachian schools where they worked. Gail noted that,
The teachers who were [at the local city school]. . .it’s not that their hearts weren’t

good, but they didn’t have the same struggles [that we had in the rural school].

You know, they had more of the middle class kids. I think that [for us] having the

kids whose lives were not as enriched made us think more about, “How can these

kids come out with as good an education as the kids whose lives started out

easier?”

For Gail helping children from rural Appalachian Ohio have the same experiences as

their age cohorts in more affluent schools helped her push for changes at the school

where she worked. As Gail talked about the Roundtables she noted with a shake of her

head, “The thing that struck me last night, when I was looking at it [her Roundtable file],

was how much we’re still talking about the same [issues].”

*Fight for Kids*

As Gail talked about her Friday Roundtable participation a strong conviction of

purpose resonated from her words. She talked about her strong belief in democratic

education and its potential to bring social justice to Ohio’s schools. She said,

I know about the politics of education, too. It just makes me so mad. In Ohio,

we’re such a huge bad example of how unfair the [school] system is.

For Gail the realities of inequity in the system forced her to fight harder for the children

she works with everyday in her rural Appalachian elementary school. With a social

activist’s tone Gail said that she had to make a decision,

You know . . . the more you know about that [the inequities among Ohio’s school

systems], it either makes you just throw up your hands and quit, or fight harder
for these kids because they can’t fix it. You know? If I just cave in and take the easy way out or give up, then they can’t fix it themselves. There are so many things in their lives that are stacked against them.

As she talked about the reality of needing to fight for children and their rights inside an unjust educational system, Gail again turned to the Friday Roundtables. She drifted back in time to those long ago conversations and said,

We talked an awful lot about the conflict resolution with kids, too; that these little people have to learn, we want them to learn how to solve a problem and get along with other people. I think we talked an awful lot about that. If you believe that they have power over their actions, then it leads to [the belief] that they should have other powers, too. It’s not just me [as teacher] dictating to them.

Gail talked with passion, conviction and genuineness about her hope for the children of Appalachia, especially the children that she works with everyday and her belief that if they become empowered by their education that they will succeed. Specifically she said, “I know we use the word empowered a lot, and that’s so overused. But it is not just me [as the teacher] telling them what they need to know, but me taking the child, wherever they are, and broadening their world and putting value into their world, too.” As passionate as Gail was about her hopes for democratic education she noted that not all of her “traditional teacher” colleagues would agree. Gail discussed the friction that existed and still exists between the Roundtable teachers and the more traditional teachers in her school. With heaviness in her voice she noted that there was past disagreement and friction and “there still is friction.”
Friction with Traditional Teachers

In a philosophical tone Gail offered her perspective on the root of the friction between the Roundtable teachers and the “Traditional” teachers in her school. She said “I think the root was that they [the traditional teachers] felt we were critical . . . that we had the right way and they had the wrong way. This still goes on in our building to this day.” As Gail talked about this difference she was careful to not be overly critical of her fellow teachers while remaining in clear disagreement with parts of their educational philosophies. She began to discuss the concept of classroom management as an example of the differences. She told a story about being hired at her current school and the principal’s expectation that she employ a discipline strategy called “assertive discipline.” Gail lamented,

There was a discipline policy that was in place here called Assertive Discipline. When I was hired, the principal at the time told me that our whole building used Assertive Discipline, that that was a mandate, and that you [as the teacher] would have your rules posted in your room and the consequences for breaking the rules. It was a very teacher-heavy situation. I remember later saying “she [the principal] should have just fired me on the spot” because I asked her, “Well what if I don’t believe in doing that?” The response was, “Well, everyone has to do that.” I believe that the children should be involved in making the rules and that they should be part of the process, and it was not just me asserting the discipline on them, which is the whole theory of Assertive Discipline. There are still teachers in the building—at least one—who has the same rules that I think she had 20 years ago.
Gail’s use of the term “very teacher-heavy situation” matched the seriousness of her tone as she talked about this experience. As she continued talking Gail glowed with self-confidence about her democratic teaching philosophy. For Gail being a democratic teacher included making the best decisions for her students. For Gail not following the Principal’s “Assertive Discipline” model was part of being democratic. She said,

> It [being a democratic teacher] goes back to something as straightforward as that, that I was told how I would have my rules, and I said, “I don’t think I’m going to do that.” [Sometimes] I have just kept my mouth shut and done it my own way, probably, although I think we had to turn our rules in [to the principal] and the consequences [for violation the rules]. There were five levels of consequences if you broke the rules.

Gail noted that she had to “turn in the rules” but that this was done to appease her supervisor. Gail developed a different set of rules with her students help, thus sharing her teaching power with the students. As Gail talked about her introduction to “Assertive Disciple” as a classroom expectation by her principal she talked about her experiences working with both democratic and non-democratic administrators.

*Surviving Less than Democratic Administrators*

As Gail talked about working with non-democratic principals and administrators the conversation shifted to how she had maintained her democratic position. For Gail surviving as a democratic teacher included taking control of her teaching space and keeping it as democratic as possible. With a nod that acknowledged her own work she explained,
How do you survive that? You just do it [democratic education] here in your classroom? This is your [democratic] haven . . . There are pieces of it [being democratic] that you give up, I’m sure. There are pieces of it that you kind of get sneaky about. You know, I close my door and I do what I believe I need to do. But I’m an old teacher, you know? I can get away with that. That doesn’t help a new young teacher, I don’t think. I don’t know. I think the idea would be that you get a cohort of people, like we did with our roundtables, and work on what the issues are and try to figure out what your day-to-day changes can be to just take a step closer to democracy.

Gail’s day-to-day work of being democratic in her classroom outweighed the expectation that she bend to the will of a non-democratic administrator. Her willingness to not conform to undemocratic educational practices has influenced her work with state educational standards and informed her position on high stake-standardized testing.

_The Test_

As a kindergarten teacher Gail is forced to administer tests to her young students. The state of Ohio has grade standards for all grades. Regrettably, when standards are coupled with standardized testing’s high stakes culture the impact on Gail’s teaching decisions have been greatly affected. Gail explained,

I think about probably ten or 12 years ago, I was kind of feeling like I was cruising, that I’d figured out how to do kindergarten and nobody was on my back . . . I have a lot of energy and a lot of resources of my own, and have gathered them because I’ve been here for so long that I felt like I was giving the kids a good environment, and I had a good reputation with parents
because they knew me. I was doing home visits, which was built into our program at the time, and has been gone now for two years, but for 16 years, I did home visits. I really felt like I was pretty comfortable with what I was doing, and then the whole testing thing came in and pushed down what we as teachers could do in first grade and really into kindergarten.

As a seasoned teacher Gail was being forced into educational practices driven by the high stakes standardized testing mandates in her school. Often she found these expectations to be unrealistic and developmentally inappropriate. In relation to literacy instruction Gail said,

Then it just has really thrown things for a loop because we are supposed to get kids into ability groups and teach them to read. Some of them are ready to read and many of them are not, and many of them have not been read to at home, so we are supposed to forget all of that or just omit. Not forget, but omit all of those 5,000 hours, or whatever it is, that kids are supposed to sit on their parent’s lap and hear books, and just teach them phonics and teach them to read. I don’t believe that you can just skip that part of it; that you still have to build the literacy and the language, and reading will come. There’s a lot of pressure now to teach in a way that I don’t think is developmentally appropriate, or democratic, either one.

Gail’s frustration with the implications of the No Child Left Behind mandates was visible on her face. As she talked, her eyes seemed to focus on the seriousness of her concerns adding, “It was very un-empowering for a teacher, and for a child, to have to do that.”
State Standards

Gail does not oppose state standards. She does oppose mandated instructional programs. She explained,

One of the good things that have actually happened recently in Ohio is that the standards – we all have our set of standards that I’m supposed to reach these standards or teach these standards in kindergarten. Now some of them I don’t agree with, but I know this is what I’m supposed to accomplish but it doesn’t say how I have to do it. If I can have, you know, this is what the end goal is, teach them to read at whatever level, and I can figure out myself, you know, that this is the way I can make it work. That would be an empowering thing. Now it doesn’t always happen that way, but just having the set of standards is not a bad thing.

For Gail the problem is not the state standards but the cultural development inside the school that teaches to the test.

I asked Gail if the state mandated the path to the standard and she said, “no.” Gail explained,

No, not directly. Now it depends which school you’re in. Some schools are looser and some are more structured as far as what they tell you and how they have you do it. All of the testing has to kind of fit in that, and that’s a bad thing, in my opinion. A lot of what’s happening is people are teaching to the test. They’re not really teaching to the standards; they’re teaching to the test.

For Gail the testing culture created by No Child Left Behind has pushed poorly performing school districts, like hers, to more tightly focus on the student’s test scores as
the primary measure of their success. As a result of this focus some districts have adopted more controlled teaching methods.

Direct Instruction

For Gail an example of her school district mandating controlled teaching methods is “Direct Instruction.” As she described direct instruction and its impact on her classroom Gail’s face tightened in distress. She said that direct instruction was part of the No Child Left Behind Act. She said that her school’s use of direct instruction in reading was the result of large grants offered by the NCLB Act. She noted that,

George Bush’s part of No Child Left Behind [included] these big grants. Huge grants. We got $1.5 million for this “Reading First program” for five years of reading, because we were a high-risk district [based on test scores]. With “Reading First” you had to have a program that was . . . “Scientifically Based Reading Research.”

Gail paused briefly and continued with a sigh,

Then we are under the auspices of this grant saying you’ve got to do this, so that made it hard. I did more of the Direct Instruction. I tried it. I said, “I’ll try it. I’ll try it. I’m not just trying to be a naysayer.” I can honestly say that I tried it for one year. I still couldn’t do it the way—I just can’t make kids do that.

Specifically she stated that direct instruction includes a “scripted program” where the teacher reads directly from a script and students must face forward with their feet on the floor and their hands on their lap. Gail said,
I’m supposed to use one of these scripts [and say] “This is O. Ready? O,” and then . . . “Feet on the floor. Eyes on me. Get ready.” I’m supposed to use that every day with all the groups for many, many, many minutes. I’m not even sure what the time is . . . and then you’re supposed to have worksheets that go with it.

The use of this program stripped Gail of her teacher expertise in the area of literacy instruction. She was angry about this process. To her credit Gail understands the utility of such a program, “It’s not that it’s a program that doesn’t have any merit in any situation, but it was meant to be a remedial program. It was not meant to be the whole reading program.”

For Gail the use of “the Scientifically Based Reading” program called “Direct Instruction” meant the loss of her professional teacher judgment, insights, experience and wisdom. Gail explained her understanding of this program’s creation,

The guy who came up with this particular program, “Direct Instruction”. . . He says something to the effect of, “I don’t give a whit about teachers’ creativity or kids’ desire to learn. I have made a foolproof program. You cannot go wrong. If you carry out this program, kids will learn to read.” It was kind of reading for dummies and is about as undemocratic as you can be.

For Gail the implication of both the loss of her teacher expertise and the forced use of an undemocratic instructional technique weighs heavily on her as a democratic teacher. She firmly believes that a more democratic or progressive educational approach to literacy yields equal or better results. She stated that she gets good results from her students with a more organic approach to literacy,
I do [get positive results], but the thing is that a qualitative rather than a quantitative [measure] for my students is that they want to read books. They love reading. They check a book out every night; they take it home for their parents to read to them. I mean they’re really motivated because it’s a good thing. Nobody ever asks to do any of those damn worksheets, you know, because it’s a satisfying activity, but to look at a book or to read a book, or to be reading your own words, that is.

Gail refuses to completely give into the “direct instruction” method of literacy instruction. She continues to act from a place of personal and professional conviction related to how best help her students learn.

_Maladjustment/Self preservation_

Gail wants her students to do well in school and she remains dedicated to helping them succeed regardless of the external pressures to perform well on the high-stakes standardized test used in her school. Regrettably, Gail has been forced to developed strategies that allow her to comply with her schools testing expectations while remaining true to her democratic educational values. Gail explained that she is expected to both assess her students’ abilities using the state’s testing models and also use these assessments to implement the districts instructional expectations related to test score improvement (e.g., direct instruction). As Gail explained the dilemmas in this vicious assessment/testing cycle her frustration with the system was physically apparent on her face. With a painful grimace on her face she shared,

Now one of the other parts of this is the testing pieces that we had to do . . . was a whole [series] of assessments . . . When we first started I didn’t pay that much
attention to it [the assessment results]. I just tried to figure out how to get it in without breaking into my quality time of teaching. Then I was told, because the kids didn’t do very well on the tests, that – this is hard to follow, I know, without understanding the tests – but you gave the test three times. Gave it near the beginning of the year, and identified who was high risk. The standard was set pretty low, so I didn’t have many kids that came out as high risk. Then you gave it again in February, and they were supposed to make so much progress. Well in February, because of the numbers on this test, I was told that I had all these kids, who were not high risk at the beginning of the year who were high risk in February, and it was my fault, that I had made them high risk. I said, “Wait a minute.” I actually had this exchange. I said, “Why would you believe these numbers? I know who’s high risk and who’s not. I knew [certain] kids were high risk when they walked in the door, after one day with them. Why do you believe these numbers?” I was told by the data manager, “Well, you gave the test.” I said, “I can’t believe the stupidity of that. Why would that make me believe the test was valid?”

The harsh reality that a test score is valued as a better indicator of a student’s success or lack of success than her own informed, professional judgment as an experienced teacher remains a painful reality for Gail. Regrettably this is the reality of her work in the era of NCLB. Her solution to this problem was to raise her student’s score without sacrificing their education in the process. She said “So what I’ve learned to do is to teach them that test, so that they get good numbers on that test now.”
Teach to the Test to Beat the Test

As Gail discussed her decision to teach to the test as a strategy designed to appease the administrators of her school she sighed with the disgust of having to play this game. She said,

I know that sounds horrible, [but] one of the things they [my students] have to do is called phoneme segmentation. It’s to break a word, like table, into sounds. T-a-b-l-e. You need that skill in order to write and in order to sound out a word. You know, if you see a T-A-B-L-E. Rather than—anyway, what the test is, we have a stopwatch. It’s a speed test. I say a word to them, and they have to break it into parts. I say, “Tell me all the sounds in goat,” and they go, “Goat.” Then I say the next word, and I’m there marking away how many times they can do it. Well, when I hadn’t taught them to do that, they didn’t do very well.

For Gail the reality of the test scores is that they do not indicate a student’s educational potential or capacity to learn or not learn. They are only a measure of achievement related to a specific action or behavior that can be taught and improved. She explained this position saying,

Now I teach them to do that [phoneme segmentation], and they just do great.

Now I don’t know if there’s any carryover. I mean I’ve always taught them to break a sound into words so that they can write, but now I’m doing it so that I can beat the damn test. I don’t know if it’s making them write and read any better. . . I think it kind of covers my rear end. No one has called me back on the carpet to say, “You’re making these kids high risk,” because my test numbers are good. The kids are going into first grade equal or ahead of the kids who are—because
the other kindergarten is doing the Direct Instruction program pretty much as it’s written.

For Gail the reality of using direct instruction to teach literacy based on skills testing is an assault on her teaching ability and her students’ capacity to learn. She does not think this system would be tolerated in more affluent schools. Specifically, regarding the use of this type of instruction she said,

Oh, no [this does not occur in more affluent schools]. Only poor schools use this. No, if they tried doing this at [a more affluent local school], those parents would have a hissy fit to treat their kids that way. We had lost a bunch of parents, because they’re saying, “This is not reading. My kid hates this.” Then all the behavior problems started because kids are [forced] to sit there doing all this trained stuff—that’s my own interpretation of it—so no, we lost some parents. They went straight to [a more affluent district] because they did not want their children treated this way.

*Appalachia*

As Gail talked about her work in rural Appalachian Ohio both an admiration and concern for the children and families unfolded. Gail explained that,

Being in the Appalachian area and with lots of poor kids, it was a different population than what I had grown up with, certainly, or worked with in Illinois. I think I just came to respect the families and the backgrounds of the kids . . . I guess my role is to not—I mean a lot of times I hate their choices, as far as how they spend their little meager bit of money, but I’ve never been in their shoes, you know, to have that little bit. I think the thing that home visits have really driven
home to me is just how important each child is. I mean we can get fed up with these kids, because some of them are just hard to deal with. Then you go in their homes and you see, “Gosh, they’re the best kids they’ve got. They’re just.”

Gail did not finish this sentence. She simply stood up and walked across the room; with the concern and love for the children in her classroom coming forward as tears touched her cheeks. She found a box of tissues in a small table and returned to our conversation.

Gail shared more of her “home visit” experiences. As she talked Gail was both pleased with the families she worked with and mildly put-off by her home visits experiences. Gail said,

Home visits have been—I have been lost on every road in this county, I think. It’s interesting because sometimes you’ll go to a home that just looks just horrible, on the outside, and that’s your only impression. Then I go through the door, and everything is neat as a pin, pictures and certificates, and candles burning. They don’t have much, but they’re proud of what they have. I’ve been in some homes that are pretty horribly dirty, too, but then I’ve been in just a lot that they’re getting by, you know? They’ve got their system of making ends meet, and it doesn’t always work really well. I think the kids watch too much TV and play too many computer games, and do all of that stuff; don’t eat a very good diet and there are people who are smoking. But I see that joy in those parents’ faces when their kid says, “Look, I can read this to you.” I just think we need to not lose that.
As Gail said “I just think we need to not lose that” a determined smile crossed her face, and the need for a tissue was replaced by her intimate understanding of the grim realities of being a teacher in one of the poorest rural counties in Ohio. Gail talked about the difference in experiences her students bring to the classroom verses more affluent students. Gail said,

Yeah, and they read books in the home, and they have a vacation, where they get to go see a zoo. I mean we have kids that have never gone to the zoo. They’ve never gone anywhere. You know, it’s just easier for them to take in the information that’s given and do something with it. Now I’m really an advocate of giving the kids as many experiences as possible because they don’t have those experiences.

Gail recognized the limitations that her students experienced based on their geographical and economical experiences as people from an impoverished area of rural Appalachian Ohio. However, she was also fully aware of the positive strengths her students brought to her classroom.

Gail quickly shared her observations about the positive elements of working as a teacher in rural Appalachian Ohio. She said,

We do, but we also—yeah, poverty is—there’s poverty and then there’s some cultural—I don’t know what the right word is. Cultural mores or engrained cultural practices, both good and bad. I think the extended family is a really good thing that I see. Almost everyone here has grandparents and cousins. Sometimes, when a new kid will come into school and they’ll say, “Oh yeah. They’re the stepson of so-and-so,” but I see strength in that, and a security for those kids
that’s a good thing. I guess I just don’t want to fall into it, too, you know, complaining that these parents didn’t help their kids with their homework, or that they have money for the bake sale but they don’t have money for school fees. You know, all of those things. It’s really easy in our middle class mind to be pretty down on them, but I don’t know any parent who doesn’t want to do right by their kids. They don’t carry it out the way that I might with my kids . . . I’m amazed by what families have to do to get by. I really am.

*What I Most Value about Myself*

Gail paused as she contemplated what she most valued about herself as a democratic teacher. The question seemed to catch her off guard. She finally said,

Probably helping the kids with that whole conflict resolution thing, and that’s a very huge thing. Since I’m always in kindergarten, you never see that they get better at it, you know? We get better for the year, but then you go back to starting all over again. I think that we really have a sense of community in here.

One of the ways Gail measures her success in the area of conflict resolution is through her fellow teachers’ comments about her students’ behavior. She explained that,

Right now, and this happened last year, too, the other teachers who had my kids; the art, PE and the music teachers, the other teachers who see them on the playground, they’ll say, “You got the good kids this year,” or, “That other class, Whew!” I want them to recognize that we work at that all the time, of how you get along, how you’re responsible for your own behavior, how you are a community with the others, how you take responsibility. It does work, but you can’t just tell a kid—you know, they’ll come to you on the playground and they’ll
say, “[so and so] is hitting me.” You can’t say, “Go tell [him] to stop. Go use your words,” because [he] is still going to hit him. They probably did use their words. You [as a teacher] have to troop across the playground and you have to say, “Do you want me to help you with that problem?” Then you wonder over there and you say, “I’ll listen while you tell him.”

For Gail “trooping” across a playground helps her students develop the skills they need to be more democratic with each other. She said,

I have done that 10,000 times, and I’m still doing it, because I believe in each kid doing it. Because they’re not going to learn. You can’t just tell them why it’s not going to change the first five years of their life. I think I’m pretty patient, because I believe in that process of following through. We had a new little boy in here, just his third day, and we were having a morning meeting on Tuesday. I said, “When everybody in here solves problems together . . .and well sometimes people can’t follow the rules and then we have to help them.”

For Gail part of this process is also letting students know when they are doing something right and good for the community. For her by stating, “well I noticed some things today. I noticed that so-and-so helped so-and-so clean up without being asked” her students develop the same capacities with each other and “then they’ll say, “Well I noticed . . .”
Ben

*Teaching History*

Ben has worked as a classroom teacher for more than thirty years most of which has been spent teaching elementary school children in rural school districts in Appalachian Ohio. Ben is a founding member of the Friday Roundtables. As he told his story, a deep commitment to democratic education was evident in his words.

Ben face revealed a well etched smile as he discussed how much he enjoys working with primary age school children. The smile remained visible as he told the story of how he became a teacher. He said,

I tutored young kids in high school. I liked that, but I never really considered that to be a potential career path. Then in college, I did the same thing. I worked in the Student Community Involvement Program at [a large, urban, public university]. In the meantime, I was trying to figure out what I was going to do for a career. After a while, I had a great moment of enlightenment and decided what I’d like to do most I should do for a job, so I switched from accounting. I have a bachelor’s [degree] in accounting, but by the time I finished at [college] I knew I was going to go into education. As soon as I could, I got my masters [degree]. I had another year in between, before I went to graduate school, but I was researching colleges of education.

Ben chuckled as he talked about his move from accounting to education. He noted that this decision was made at a “late point” in his undergraduate experience and required him to seek his teaching licensure process at the graduate level.
As he talked about searching for a graduate program in education he seemed pleased with his educational journey. I had to find a college where I could be certified and get my masters at the same time since I had already had a bachelor’s in a non-related field. I read a bunch of things in education in the meantime and decided that’s what I wanted to do. I graduated in 1977 from [a large public university in rural Ohio] with my masters.

With a shrug he added “I mean it got me what I needed to be able to become a teacher, and gave me a chance to think some about education, too.” Ben explained that he had a desire to teach and live in rural Appalachian Ohio and his first job was in such a location. He has remained a teacher in the region for over thirty years, Ben has taught the fourth grade at the same school for the past 21 years. He was involved with the Friday Roundtables as a founding member.

*Roundtables*

Ben became reflective and philosophical as he talked about his work, over twenty years ago, with the Friday Roundtables. For Ben three strong points emerged for his story about this work. He discussed the influence the Roundtables had on his development as a teacher, he talked about the supportive nature of the roundtable and he stressed the space and time for professional reflection the roundtables afforded the group.

Ben’s participation with the Friday Roundtables was formed in part from an activist leaning. He had been involved in other organizations that coupled social justice action within an educational frame. As he explained his involvement in the Roundtables, a flood of ideas and interests became interjected into his story. He explained,
In the middle ‘80s, after “A Nation at Risk” came out in 1983 . . . I knew some people at the Center for International Studies. We had done some work on international education, and some of these same people were interested in democratic education, too. That was when I started attending [the Roundtable meetings] . . . I was also a member of Educators for Social Responsibility, because I was involved in the peace movement with People for Peace, which then they wanted to start an educational sort of outreach program. Then we founded a local chapter of Educators for Social Responsibility . . . it’s a national group that still exists . . . But yeah, they were teacher roundtables. People discussed democratic ideas and approaches to teaching, and then there were workshops . . . it became the Institute for Democracy in Education, eventually.

The above reflection offers an important insight into complexity of ideas, actions and interests that help to form Ben’s world view and inform his teaching practice.

*How the Roundtables Influenced Me as a Teacher*

For Ben the Friday Roundtables had a definite effect on his development as a teacher and his thinking about education. In response to the question, “Do you feel like that time in the ‘80s, when you were working with the roundtables and IDE, influenced how you’ve thought about education over the past 20 years or 30 years?” Ben said,

Oh yeah, definitely. Definitely. Yeah. I mean I read ‘Re-Thinking Schools,’ and I understand what they’re talking about. I mean the ideas in there resonate across time. I mean what matters to kids is—I mean what really affects them is
things . . . there’s emotion as well as intellectual knowledge. That’s what they remember, and then that’s how they make decisions later on about who they’re going be, what kind of careers they’re going to pursue, I mean how they’re going to act as citizens. All that is tied to emotions as well as knowledge. I think those groups in the ‘80s helped me see that that was what was really where we’re at, how you could get there.

The formative impact on his teaching, based on his Roundtable participation, helped him better understand his roadmap for and practice of democratic education. This experience had had a powerful effect on Ben and twenty-plus years later he paused and slipped into a reflective gaze seeming to look nowhere and everywhere at the same time.

After a moment he continued to talk in more specifics about his participation in the Roundtable and how the group influenced his work as a teacher. He said,

I remember in the early ‘80s, we used to talk about value-free education. We didn’t want to impose our values. That’s impossible. I mean the roundtables said democracy matters, and those are values that we want to impose. I mean as much as you can say democracy can be imposed. I mean it’s what we want to model and say we value, so the students can then reject or accept that idea, but we’re not going to be value-free in how we approach education. We’re going to say, “Democracy is what our country is about. That’s why we have public schools, so that’s why you’re here.”

Ben’s clarity of thought regarding the purpose of schools and his role as a teacher came forth from a place of practice and persistent intellectual work. The Roundtables provided
him with a place to think about his educational philosophy and the support to put it into action.

*Action through Support and Reflection*

Ben clearly valued the supportive nature of the Roundtable. He also found journals and other written materials helpful in his work as a democratic educator. He noted that,

. . . the support of others is real important, especially in the face of opposition from administrators or other teachers, so the idea of networking and support. Then to me, also, the value of publications that are reflective, you know that I’m not the only one out there that thinks the way I do, so I think that’s important.

For Ben his democratic teaching actions were helped by the group’s reflective nature. When asked if the group was reflective he replied with a nod he added,

I think it’s missing from [a teacher routine]. I mean you could do it there [in the Roundtable], and you didn’t really have permission other places to do that. It isn’t that it was – well, I guess it actually is discouraged; it was discouraged at the time. Now, we would say it isn’t, but the state speaks out of two sides of their mouth. I mean they’re willing to say, “Yeah, you should do that as long as your conclusions adhere to what we think is the right thing to do.”

For Ben the “right thing to do” was to teach from a democratic position.

*Democratic Education*

Ben’s deep commitment to democratic educational practices started with an interest in “student centered education.” Ben stated that,
I was always interested in sort of student-centered education, but I wasn’t – no, I think when I went through grad school, although I read people, the educational philosophers that I agreed with, I don’t think my practice was [democratic] – I had inclinations, but not a very well developed idea on what I was doing.

Ben’s work with the Friday Roundtables helped him clarify and develop an understanding of democratic education.

With a smile and a forward movement in his chair Ben paused thoughtfully for a moment before offering his understanding or definition of democratic education. He shared,

I think it means that students have some ownership of what they are learning. The idea is to create concerned citizens. To do that, I think you have to start when students are young, so that the knowledge they gain they see as having some purpose . . . that it relates somehow to their future, and they see themselves as being able to affect their future.

As he continued talking Ben shifted forward in his chair until his hands where folded and resting on the table we shared. He shared,

I think the practical part of this is I want kids to say, “This is what I learn. It’s me. I’m responsible for what I do, and I can see how it’s going to matter to me, what I learn.” The theory of it would be, you know, you have to give kids the skills and knowledge, so that what they learn matters in the big picture. At a young age, you know, they learn citizenship skills, and some of it’s also community skills, too. I mean, like how to work together and why it matters if you work together? What does it mean to work together? Who’s in our community?
Ben’s work as a democratic teacher includes a desire to help develop a democratic spirit in his students. He added,

I think in the long run, kids want to see themselves as successful and see themselves as learning what they know matters. They want to learn about each other and be with each other, and at the same time learn what the state says they have to learn. It’s possible to do both, and they sort of suspect that’s true. There’s a lot of classrooms at {my school] where they are learning both, so they know from experience as well as sort of intuitively that it’s possible.

He acknowledged that this is not the type of learning that is most valued by the state of Ohio and its educational mandates.

*Kids Can Do It*

As a democratic teacher Ben believes that his students are willing and capable of learning in a democratic space. He said, “To the extent the teachers have the attitudes that kids can do these things, and we are willing to let go enough to let them learn and make mistakes, then the kids can rise to it.” For Ben the attitudes and actions of teachers are often the biggest obstacles to democratic practices.

As he continued talking about empowering kids in their own education, he seemed pleased with his efforts as a democratic teacher. He talked about his ongoing work to bring students into the process of having shared ownership of their classroom and untimely their educational experiences. He explained this process,

To begin with, we say, “This is our classroom. What you do is your choice. I want you to do these sorts of things because I believe in these principles, and this is
what your parents sent you for to learn. Let’s talk about what we want to learn.”

Then we’ll talk about how we’re going to learn it, and then we start from there.

We say, “What we’re going to learn is not only the curriculum, but how to get
along with others, because that’s valuable, too; how to make decisions. We can
learn what the state says is the course of study, and we can learn at the same time
how to get along with others and how to think, and also get a sense of getting to
know others better, and so we can do some values clarification sort of things in
the meantime, also.”

As he finished talking Ben smiled and said, “All those things can be done while we’re
learning what it is that we need to learn.”

As a classroom teacher Ben continues to blend his democratic philosophy with the
local, state and national mandates that drive the “how and what” of public education in
the United States. He noted that democratic educational practices and state standards,
while difficult to blend, are not “completely exclusive” of each other. Be explains,

I mean those [democratic education and state standards] aren’t completely
exclusive. [For example] I mean they [primary age students] don’t have the same
wisdom that adults do, so you can’t just abandon [them] and say, “Whatever you
guys do is okay with me.” I think your role [as a democratic teacher] is to let kids
experience being successful at managing their own lives as much as you can,
while doing things you think are responsible or expected [state standards]. So
there’s the catch, you know? Like, “Okay, so how do we let them fail without
hurting them permanently?”
As Ben talked he seemed to be making an important distinction about the concept of failure. Specifically, that the measures of success in the world of state standards via “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) does not provide students with the space to learn from their failures, while the experiences of life and learning often require failure in order to facilitate learning and growth. Ben seems to be walking the tight rope of “failure” between these two competing concepts.

*State Standards*

Ben’s demeanor shifted as he talked about the impact standardized testing and state mandated educational standards have had on his democratic educational practice. He became a little less optimistic. In a professional tone, he noted that the state standards have added a complicating dimension to his work. He said,

> Well I think it complicates it . . . I think it’s harder to follow student directive sorts of curricula, so kids can’t pick what they want to learn in the same way. I mean we have curricula mapping now . . . it’s harder to figure that out in that environment. It isn’t that it can’t be done, but it’s harder . . . Yeah, there were more possibilities [prior to NCLB], I think, in terms of when you did things and how you did them, and for how long you did them. . . There was always a course of study, and you had to cover what was in the course of study. But I think there was more freedom to spend a lot of time on something that mattered to the kids, so you could go into more depth. That’s harder now.
Ben’s acknowledgement of how hard it was to remain democratic in an educational system that was undemocratic did not seem to frustrate him as much as the manner by which NCLB and its application has been presented to him.

Ben shared that his real frustration and sense of disbelief was not with the state imposing standards but with the philosophical positions of those who ride the school circuit helping teachers understand the state’s expectations. With a laugh that was more out of disbelief than humor he shared,

I mean the standards movement is – we had a guy come to our school and he said, “You know how you go to McDonald's and buy a hamburger anywhere, and you know it’s going to be about the same?” He said, “That’s how it should be with kids.” We [the teachers in my school] were just staring at him like, “What the hell are you talking about?” There’s the notion that all kids should have the same experiences . . . The standards movement was created with this notion that you can do that, that all that matters is creating this standard body of knowledge.

Ben paused and said in a low voice, “Hamburgers?” After a brief moment and visibly annoyed he added, “I think that’s all I have to say about that.”

**Blending Democratic Ideals with State standards**

Ultimately, Ben has blended the states expectations into his democratic teaching. However he remains critical of the imposed standards. With a sharpened tone he shared,

I think it’s in the way that you do it, in the way you teach. You can teach standards in a way that you find more democratic, but it is limiting, too, so it’s both. I mean now you’re really accountable for materials you use, also. You have
to prove – I mean there’s a big emphasis on reading on scientific literature, I mean scientific approaches to reading, which I think is a bunch of malarkey, because a lot of it wasn’t so scientific, even though they claimed it was. So that was an attempt to limit materials, which are also part of curricula, of course, too. That’s had a negative impact, but we’ve sort of gotten past that now.

For Ben the state’s standards are only part of the overall assault on democratic educational practice. Another is the state’s “grading” of schools based on their performance on standardized test.

*Test Scores?*

Ben’s school has recently “slipped” in its position related to the state’s NCLB ranking system. After a deep breath Ben shared his thoughts related to high-stakes standardized testing and its use as a measure of school success. He shared,

Currently we’re in school improvement . . . [our school] wasn’t in it for a long time. School improvement means that two years ago we didn’t achieve a year’s worth of growth, according to what we needed. It’s called AYP, which is Annual Yearly Progress. It’s a very complicated formula. If you don’t make AYP—this is No Child Left Behind—for two years in a row, then you go into school improvement. We missed by six-tenths of one percent, or less than that. It was a very small amount . . . We had to do some things as a result of that, so it puts work on the principal and the teachers to try and make your school better, according to them.
Ben scoffs at the notion that outside agents or institutions using a standardized method can accurately access his school’s academic health. With a quick shake of his head he noted that their “efforts to improve” are only designed to raise the test score. He added, 

...if you think that’s better, you’re naïve . . even the NEA has recognized that one test or one-shot tests may not be the perfect picture of student knowledge. If it isn’t, well let’s say even if it is, it’s a sad commentary on what we value in education . . If it isn’t, then not only are you—you know, I mean you’re creating some kind of myth that you can measure schools that way, and then that that’s all they need to know. I mean it’s like it’s minimizing what schools are about, and teachers. It’s all very D-e-m-e-a-n-i-n-g.”

Ben’s emphasis on the last word was slow and pronounced.

*Teacher Power*

For Ben a democratic classroom works best when students help shape the educational direction with their teacher. Ben notes that many teachers struggle with the implications of sharing this much “power” with students because of they view their role as the “savior” of children?

Yeah, because they had a different vision when they came in [to the teaching profession]. I mean they were going save kids. I mean the idea of them as savior is different, that philosophy is going to lead to a different approach to how much they’re going let kids do things for themselves, and how much you’re going do it for them because you know best.
For Ben this more traditional notion of the teacher serving as the all-knowing, all-powerful knowledge holder and giver of knowledge completely shuts down a democratic process in schools. He noted that,

People who view the power thing as a zero sum, they see themselves suffering somehow because kids have more power, but it isn’t really like that. I don’t really see it that way. When kids are empowered to solve their own conflicts—this is one of the big arguments for conflict resolution—then teachers have more time to do what they really want to do, which is remediate . . . To the extent you can let go of solving all kids problems, you’re going to have something else hopefully you’re doing in the meantime, which is more valuable.

Ben paused briefly and smiled as if in disbelief of the realities that students experience in schools as teachers seek to maintain control through the disempowerment of students.

As Ben continued talking about teacher’s resistance to sharing power and the more prevalent practice of their hording power in schools, the activist elements of his work as a democratic teacher surfaced. He returned to the purpose of schools in Ohio.

Well I think the resistance had to do with what tradition . . . I think people [administrators, teachers, students and parents] that didn’t understand the traditions of education may have said, “Oh, well, this is the traditional way. This is what everyone should do because it’s the way we’ve always done it.” . . . Every generation had to rethink what it is to be responsible and prepare citizens. That’s hard, because if you’re not experienced with it and you didn’t experience it in school—and we run into that with parents, too, because if parents didn’t do it in school, then they think it’s not valuable, but it is valuable. I mean that was the
element of the resistance. The other big element then was how power is going to be delegated in the school. People that are interested in power or conflict, they would sort of latch onto what they saw as differences. They would focus on the differences instead of what we had in common.

Ben’s understanding of the purposes of school in Ohio and his desire to empower students has helped fuel his desire to remain a classroom teacher in rural Appalachian Ohio.

*Appalachia*

Three points quickly emerged for Ben as he thought about his work as a democratic teacher in rural Appalachian Ohio: community, poverty and the positive aspects of the area’s children. He was quick to note that “I have always worked in rural Ohio.” Ben seemed to relish his work with the students in this region.

*Community*

Ben explained that the area in which he works has a strong and visible sense of community. He explained his understanding of community, especially noting the tight connections of neighbors and family,

Yeah, well I mean they’ll help out their neighbors and their family. I mean if people in their family need stuff, then they’ll try to provide for them. A lot of the people in [our school district] have been together [for a long time] . . . they went to school together and they know each other. That sense of community is important.
Ben explained that this sense of community and belonging is a strength that is not always valued by people external to the region. He continued adding,

When you’re from there, they just accept you for who you are. You don’t have to prove yourself to other people. Whereas in other places, where there’s a more transient population, people moved in and it’s like, “Okay, you’re my neighbor so what are you like? Why should I care about you? What can you do for me?” I mean, it’s more to that sort of thing or, “Do I even make the effort to know you,” I mean, they know a lot of people. I guess that’s really a positive thing, so the knowing and accepting, I think, they’re big things.

Ben’s long history in his school has allowed him the opportunity to reach the children of some of his earlier students. He noted “I know their parents” and for him this relationship is part of the strength of the community.

**Poverty**

Ben understands that his students often come from families that have few possessions and very little money. The most painful factor for Ben was the “limits” poverty places on children. He said, “Certainly some kids have a limited experience because of the poverty they experience.” He finds that many of his students are highly adaptable to their life circumstances. As a democratic teacher Ben works to empower his students to be full members of their classroom and school.

**Positive Aspects**

As Ben continued talking about the negative aspects of poverty that many of his students experience, he, as if to shield himself from these realities, quickly turned his
attention to the positive aspects of their experiences. He seemed uncomfortable with the reality that children do not get to make a choice about where they live and under what circumstances their lives are played out. He noted,

I think it’s important to present positive aspects of Appalachia, too, because sometimes people—I mean the poverty does—I think even while the people are relatively poor, they do have, like I said, family and community. There are some values that are positive that are related to being from this area, also. It goes together. It’s of the same piece. You can’t really separate it. You know, that’s what I want to say. On the big picture, we certainly lack political power. I mean Voinovich [former Governor of Ohio] was just completely oblivious to Appalachia. He wasn’t from the area and he didn’t really relate well, so he just said, “Well, that’s the way they like it, so that’s what you get. You’re from there and that’s the choice you make,” but kids don’t get to pick, of course.

Ben paused for a moment before adding,

The other big thing, I guess—I don’t know if you’ll get to this or not—and this is what I’ve told people for 25 years, I’m always surprised at how well kids are adjusted to their circumstances. Not that they’re poorly adjusted, but in these grades kids are better usually than their parents are in terms of their social adjustment to their circumstances. They try to do the best they can. Some of their circumstances are pretty bleak.

Ben’s last statement seemed to hang in the air between use a like a thick smog. It was this unwanted reality, the reality that many of his students come from uncomfortable places, that makes Ben’s work as a democratic teacher all the more important. He noted,
I think kids from these backgrounds [of poverty] that aren’t from a family background that values education, they need the “why” a lot more, because it’s harder for them to envision a future of success in education.

Ben’s democratic educational position seems to have helped him embraced the challenges of teaching in rural Appalachian Ohio.

*My Teaching*

For Ben the answers to the following questions: “What gives life to my teaching?” and “What I Most Value about myself as a democratic teacher?” caused him to pause before answering. It was similar to asking an accomplished baseball hitter to explain the important parts of their swing techniques, you know that they can tell you, but they are not always practiced at articulating their own movements. With a well practiced smile he said, “My wife would love this, me talking about my teaching.”

*What Gives Life to My Teaching*

Ben likes working with young children and learning new things. As an elementary school teacher he has the opportunity to do both. He said,

Well I enjoy being with kids. I think that’s how I started, and it’s still true. Kids are both challenging and forgiving. They live in the moment, so they’re willing to let go of past things a lot better than adults. They focus on the now, and to some extent the future, but more the now. The now is, you know, “What is this for me right here?” which is good. Then we have a lot of kids thinking different things at the same time, so it’s complex enough that you realize there’s possibilities there. Not everyone’s learning at the same rate. Not everyone’s in the same interests.
Basically, kids of the age level that I’ve worked with, adults are credible people to them, so it’s easy to form a good relationship. You’re not being challenged really on why you’re doing what you’re doing as much as, “How can I do this better? How can we do this better?” I enjoy learning myself . . . I’ve enjoyed being with students and just watching them learn and grow.

Helping students learn and grow and finding satisfaction from this work has led Ben to develop a program at his school that allows his students to expand their learning outside of his classroom.

Ben developed and helped establish a peer mediation program at his school. Ben explained,

I have a peer mediation program that’s mattered a lot to me, too. . . . I would say, that being democratic is also preparing kids to work together, and to make this society a better place . . . Education I think is a way to accomplish that.

Somehow Ben manages to stay focused on the everyday work with students without losing the bigger picture of why he is a democratic teacher.

What I Most Value about myself as a Democratic Teacher

Closely tied to his work as a democratic teacher is Ben’s desire to help students value and respect each other. With clarity of thought and voice Ben shared,

[What] I value most about myself is that I help kids see what matters, and I try to teach things that matter to students. [For me] that means you teach them about how to get along with others, as well as the content, the material, and that there’s a way to be with kids that honors their dignity . . . I’m also Roman Catholic, so peacemaking is part of how I see as the message of the gospel. I mean this work
is a way I can teach peace, and also be able to support my family and myself in a middle-class sort of manner. Then I believe, of course, in the dignity of each person, so I want to try and affirm that.

Ben understands that most or many teachers respect students. Some do not. With a look of concern he noted,

Mostly elementary teachers, I think, do think that they’re respectful of kids’ dignity. There’s been a few times where, I’ve seen at this school – well, both schools. I think I’ve seen more instances of faculty not being respectful of other faculty, even more so than of students, but I think there is a way to treat students that isn’t—they claim it’s for their own good, but I think it’s demeaning. It’s ongoing to perpetuate cycles of verbal violence. . . [For example], just saying, “Sit down. Shut up. Do it because I told you so” I mean, if I do that, and it’s not that I never do that; I don’t say, “Shut up,” but I might say, “Be quiet,” or, “Let’s talk about that later,” or just, “Be quiet.” I mean those sorts of things, that shouldn’t be the only message that kids are getting from teachers. If it is, I think it’s saying, “Kids should be seen and not heard,” which is another generation’s version of how to treat people with dignity, but not ours.

Ben is sincere and visibly troubled by treatment some students receive in his school.

**Encouraging Democratic Educational Practice**

As a democratic teacher Ben offered several important points he thinks will help move forward democratic educational practices in schools. He said,

We need cooperative learning and the conflict resolution programs. I think we need student input into what they learned, why they learned it, how it matters to
them. That would be a good start, those three things. I’m not sure what else I’d say.

After a brief pause, he added,

I think citizenship should be valued, I mean as a trait or a characteristic that’s taught in school all the time. Teachers should be thinking, “Is this [work] going to make students better citizens?” I think somehow they miss that sometimes because they’re focused on subject matter a lot. They sort of focus on their own thing without seeing the big picture.

For Ben the big picture of education is preparing students for a life of informed participation in their democratic society.

Closing

As Ben was leaving he stopped mid-stride. In the reflective tone that had marked so much of his story, he returned to the work of the Friday Roundtables. He said,

We were always looking at who’s against public schools and why would they be against public schools? They and the labor unions are the only ones that ever see the big picture of the forces at work in society. I went to Brazil in 1991 with a . . . professor at Indiana State, and there the big emphasis was on private schools, like how the wealthy would never send their kids to public schools. He said, “This is what America is going to be like in 15 years.” It’s been a real struggle not to have that happen in America.

Ben took another step toward the door, stopped and smiled, and closed our conversation saying,
Yeah. So, I mean and that was really revealing for me, because it was like looking at the macro climate for education [is that] teachers a lot of times focus [only] on the micro. If they don’t see the macro, then it just sort of runs them over and they don’t realize it. [The Roundtable] was always really good about saying, “Okay, these people all have this agenda,” and it’s not tied to what kids are learning. It’s more about, “Okay, what’s school for?” They always use Dewey, that’s another important thing, too. When they read about John Dewey, who was like, “This is what schooling is supposed to be about.”

Ben’s democratic work gives life to Dewey’s words.
Introduction

Thomas has recently retired from teaching after serving as an elementary and middle school teacher for over thirty years in the same rural school district located in Appalachian Ohio. He continues to volunteer at his former school and currently works with undergraduate pre-service teachers. In a thoughtful and nurturing manner that seemed to have been honed over his many years in the classroom, he shared his teaching story and his democratic teaching philosophy. Several themes emerged from his story including his teaching history, involvement in the Friday Roundtables, democratic teaching philosophy, work in rural Appalachian Ohio, understanding of classroom management, views on high stakes testing and his hopes for democratic educational practice.

Teaching History

Thomas’ pre-service teacher training centered on working with “Learning Disabled” students. He said,

I started teaching in 1973 in . . . a local school district at the middle school as a special education teacher. The state was funding middle school, or junior high, learning disabilities [LD] classes for the first time that year. So I opened up an LD class at the middle school; taught that for three years. Then I taught social studies. After which time the middle school was dissolved and I went to [an elementary school] for 16 years; taught fifth and sixth grade.

Thomas’ training as a “Learning Disabled” teacher and his early experiences with elementary age children helped lead him to a democratic teaching style.
Intuitive Democratic Education

He noted with a humble smile that it “seemed logical” to treat children democratically. He stated that his early work as a teacher helped him become democratic. He shared,

Probably during that time that I started [being] democratic—well, I guess to an extent, even when I started with the learned disabilities classes, it just seem logical to bring kids into the process of deciding what we were going to do and how we were going to learn . . . So like even the first year, I had a group of kids who were extremely interested in things that were going on all around them, like logging in the area and stuff like that. So we developed a program where we actually went and visited on-site some people who were doing work out in the field and found out information about what they were doing, how they did it, what kind of skills, academic skills, even that they used.

As Thomas talked about this “project” based learning approach his passion for this type of teaching shined on his face. His sense of joy regarding working with students in a collaborative manner offered an exciting and passionate dimension to his story. He said,

Yeah. Another thing we did, which I really wish we had the technology available that we do now, but we tried to come up with like a newsletter just finding people what the kids were interested and what they were doing and just doing some interviews and then using that as a basis for reading and writing lessons . . . I just capitalized on the interest of the kids. It got them excited and involved. It just seemed like a logical thing to do. There was no great revelation. It didn’t come out of a whole lot of what I studied [in my teacher preparation]. It just—I guess I
worked with a group of these kids throughout my college career. I’d known them and done different things with them. I knew they had real definite interests and those interests could be a vehicle to learn.

Thomas’ humble and genuine demeanor seemed to prevent him from over emphasizing his teacher contributions to the process of helping students develop their interests as part of their educational process.

Questions Instead of Answers

As Thomas talked about his pre-roundtable teaching his mind returned to those years and offered an important memory about his teaching practice. He said,

I guess it touches another memory. The year before I went out on a sabbatical, I read this book, “Teaching as a Subversive Activity,” which was a turning point in my career, I guess. So I started that year trying to base my curriculum more on questions rather than answers . . . At the time I figured it wasn’t really what the people in my building were interested in having someone do. I think it’s still rather revolutionary. You don’t necessarily know where it’s going to end up once you start the process.

Thomas smiled as he said the previous statement. He then shared that he had at the time made the decision to leave his teaching position for a yearlong sabbatical with the possibility of not returning to the classroom.

Sabbatical

At about his tenth or eleventh year of teaching Thomas decided to take a year off and was not sure he would return, he said, “I left that year wondering if I was going to
come back.” Thomas noted that he left with the understanding that he would return, but he was unsure if he would. He noted,

The expectation, I guess, was that I would come to the district although the possibility was there that I wouldn’t. Yeah. My feeling was – I was, at that point, pretty burned out and pretty discouraged. So off I went. I was interested in computers, so I was going do something in computers . . . But I didn’t have near the math background. So I went into international affairs thinking that I could do something with that. And Latin American studies. I got interested in the Christian-based community in Latin America, which was a tremendous educational experience for everyone involved with them. Of course, Liberation Theology and all that . . . I came out of there feeling, “Gosh, education can have exciting and meaningful . . . it can affect people’s lives rather than just bore them to death.”

At the same time Thomas returned from his one-year sabbatical, the Friday Roundtables were starting to meet. The excitement related to the ideas he learned through Liberation Theology fueled his desire to rethink his educational praxis. He noted that, “I got excited. So, I came back [to teaching] and it was a powerful point in my life . . .”

With a quick smile and a reflective nod Thomas talked about his first impressions of the Roundtables. He said,

I began going to the roundtables and we began doing other things, looking into—at the ways of teaching—I don’t know—kids could get excited about, I could get excited about. It seemed to me that it was giving them experiences that were well beyond anything [I had done before].
Thomas also remembered not being fully impressed with the leadership of the Roundtable Group.

*The Friday Roundtables*

Initially, Thomas remembered that he was not impressed with the Roundtable group because two professors from the local university were involved. He noted with an apologetic chuckle,

They [the professors] both lived in [the same town] and they wanted to get something going [academically] with the teachers in the town where they lived and where their children were going to school. I remember they had a meeting. And I can remember things, great being talked about . . . but I was not really impressed . . . I mean, [it was just] two more people wanting us to do something. But it was interesting. They actually seemed to have a commitment and wanted to work with people rather than lay something on us . . . Some really interesting ideas were presented and they seemed to kind of dovetail with some ideas that I had and we kind of went from there.

Thomas noted that this was his first exposure to democratic educational theory.

*My First exposure to Democratic Education*

With a sadden expression Thomas acknowledge that even with ten years of teaching experience, his work with the Friday Roundtables provided him with his first exposure to democratic educational theory. He lamented,

As far as the roundtables went, it was actually the first time I was really exposed to anyone like John Dewey or any real intentional ways to bring kids into their own educational process . . . You have to understand too, I went through in
special education and . . . it was just a completely different model. But I don’t think it was opposed to any of the [democratic] stuff . . . It did not draw on the kids helping to build their curriculum . . . But perhaps this did kind of in a way—when I think of it—I mean, we were kind of doing the same thing although we we’re trying very purposely to give kids—get kids excited about learning the things that they needed in order to do well. And the vehicle we used for that was growing interests and letting them be one of the participants in applying the program.

Thomas became visibly excited as he talked about his participation with the Friday Roundtables. For Thomas the interaction of democratic ideas and local teachers was very powerful.

*My Development as a Teacher*

In a humble tone Thomas talked about the powerful impact the Roundtable group had on the development of his own teaching. He noted,

In any event, at the Roundtables, it just was—the fact that we were sitting there not only discussing ideas that people in higher education had, the professional college-type academics, but I guess what was really powerful was the fact that they were just 20 or 30 of us local teachers who sat down. There were teachers from all the local schools and some from fairly far away. There are also some people who were going through [a teacher education program] and they were really interested in this whole way of teaching. And they were there sharing their perspectives also . . . We kind of fed off each other, aware of what we were doing.
Then there was a group of teachers that probably weren’t as nearly as enthused about this kind of thing. I think they were aware of what we were doing, but we tried not to be too judgmental.

For Thomas the Roundtables provided a forum to more fully explore the teaching ideas he had been trying before his sabbatical.

**Power of support**

For Thomas the Roundtables were a place where classroom teachers shared their ideas and experiences related to education. With a growing enthusiasm in his voice he shared,

We [the Roundtable teachers] kind of all had ideas leading in the same direction, but we never had the opportunity just to sit down and . . . grow from each other’s experiences and ideas. Also [we] used these meetings as an opportunity to kind of crystallize in our own mind what we were doing, where we were going, how we were going to get there. It was extremely powerful.

The direction the group was moving in was a democratic direction. Thomas noted that “The acknowledgement was democratic, but not with necessarily political banter or agenda.”

**Democratic Education**

For Thomas the ideas related to democratic education are complex and interconnected. He remembers that the Roundtable group valued participation and freedom. As he told his story related to democratic education he weaved in both his roundtable experiences and his work in the classroom.
Participation for Freedom

His passion of democratic education moved Thomas forward in his chair as he talked about student participation. With the confidence of both the theoretical and his lived experiences, Thomas said,

It’s just the fact that people have—people have a right to have some control over their own destiny, to live in a society where things aren’t dictated to them, but to the degree that is reasonable and possible, that they can participate. They have—kids have a right to do things that have meaning to them. Not only is it right, but it’s really the only way that they’ll have any desire, real, desire to learn the things that will help them. If they don’t see a connection between their lives and what they’re doing, why should they buy into it?

For Thomas the powerful nature of this question speaks truth to the power dynamics in schools that often limits the freedom of students to choose related to curriculum and learning objectives in schools.

Freedom

Thomas seemed to have fire in his soul for democratic education that pushed him to help free students from the drudgery of schools. With this fire twinkling in his eyes he continued,

The fact that kids should have some freedom, that they shouldn’t live in a world that’s been totally structured for them. They should have the ability to help determine what that structure is. And also, the whole thing—the whole idea of living in a community and school for at least the classroom we have control over,
being a community and a place where people have to take other’s needs and
desires into account. They have to work together in a social situation to create
something that works . . . So I started to base my curriculum more on questions
rather than answers . . . I think it’s still rather revolutionary. You don’t necessarily
know where it’s going end up once you start the process.

Even as Thomas engaged in helping to empower his students, he remained cognizant of
the state and district standards he, as the teachers, was accountable for meeting.

*Making it Work: The Pond*

For Thomas his democratic educational values were not at odds with the standards
of the curriculum presented by the state or his district. With the seriousness of an
engineer constructing a long suspension bridge he said,

At that time also, the state was mandating that each district have a course of
study. We had all these—literally, I was teaching fifth grade. I had four or five
books worth of objectives, which probably come with a hundred objectives in
them, some of which needed to be taught—mastered rather. Some needed to be
just introduced or reviewed. So it wasn’t like a hundred things I had to teach
them, but I did have these books full of stuff. And truthfully, I looked at that as
not really much of a problem. It was a help. And the kids and I would sit down
and come up with some ideas . . . So then my job as a teacher after just kind of
guiding the process was to sit down and figure out how this was going to fit into
our curriculum. So I got out my five books and opened them up and looked at the
objectives.
The idea that Thomas and his students developed together was the construction of a pond.

For Thomas, the ponds construction fit snuggly with the curriculum expectations.

Thomas noted,

> It was amazing what I could fit into that, not everything, but it was a perfect project for science, perfect project for math, writing and reading. There was a lot of math in it though. We managed to do a fair amount of math. Social studies, we’ve got some of that.

So the work of being democratic and developing a pond was under way. Thomas remembered that,

> We had this area right in front of [our] school that just looked like a perfect place to put a little pond. And we had some room there that we could do something with. So I just kind of suggested one of the first days of school that maybe that’s something we would want to do [build a pond], just to spark the kids’ imagination and they wanted to go with it. So that day, we sat down. We divided ourselves into eight or ten groups. The kids came up with the groups, everything from liability to bringing in the bulldozers and getting to it.

Thomas smiled as he continued his story,

> So they went through this process of dividing themselves into groups and deciding what each group would decide the steps that had to go through. Then we got back together and presented to each other and modified what we were doing based on the whole overall picture. And I think by the end of the day, or at least by the end of a couple days, after, we knew what we were going to do pretty much the rest of the year as far as this particular project went.
Thomas seemed to drift back to the pond planning days. This project and his student’s reaction to it clearly made an impression on him as a democratic educator.

Meeting the Standards

For Thomas this type of teaching, teaching democratically, was meaningful and important. He did not fail to take responsibility for the standards of learning for which he, as the teacher, was responsible. As the pond project and the year progressed, he accounted for the standards expectations. He noted,

So I had this little booklet mapping what we were going to do and how it was going to tie into the curriculum. If anyone had asked, which no one did, I could have justified everything we were doing. And really, a powerful thing for me as a teacher then was just how excited and self-motivated and self-directed the kids became. And the model was we’d do things in a committee. Individuals might have jobs that they’d have to do based on their committee work. And then we’d present everything to the whole class for review. And like if a letter was going out, it was presented to the class because it was—it represented the class that they all needed to approve it. And what I really, really found interesting was the fact that kids would do revisions of their work two and three times without me even asking me them to

Thomas was able to remain democratic, empowering his student’s participation and interest without sacrificing the standards of his curriculum. He noted,

Actually, if you look at a lot of the standards, they’re real easy to integrate into stuff. I will admit there are areas I have difficulty with. It’s sometimes hard to
meet all your math standards with a project like this. But I don’t think that means you have to give up being democratic. Kids can always have some control over how you do things or how you structure things or how they reach out to see how things have meaning . . . We had this—we stressed the fact that people were going to take them as seriously as they took themselves. They wanted them to take them very seriously. They wanted to be seen as doing something that has significance well beyond the classroom. And it did have significance beyond the classroom. So we worked through this.

*Learning from Others: “Non-teachers”*

As Thomas continued his pond building story he reiterated an early point. He said, “remember, you don’t always know where you will end up once you start the process.” He concluded his story,

The interesting thing about the project, maybe one of the best things that happened to us, was one of the last people we interviewed and got information from was the health commissioner, the county commissioner. And we just thought, like everyone else, he’s going to think it’s a great idea, especially since he lived in the district and had kids go through our school. And he came and he said, “There was a septic system in that area. You want to put a pond for dozens of years, a couple decades. I’m just afraid if you put a pond there, all those bacteria are going to percolate up into the water. You’re either going to have to put irrigators in it, which means it’s not going to be what you intend it to be because it’ll affect whatever grows in the pond, or you’re not going to be able to
put it there.” And the kids were just totally devastated after he left because it was obvious that we weren’t going to be able to do it. So, for a couple of weeks we just kind of floundered. Then one of the board members, a Board of Education member, which we contacted, suggested that maybe we look at an area at the high school.

Thomas seemed to relish the idea that a board member had also become interested in the project and was trying to help the students be successful. He continued the story talking about the high school location,

And I guess looking over there and—so this is a perfect place that’s just—it’s thrushy and has three or four springs. It just looked a perfect place for a pond. So we’d start bringing people over there [to investigate the site] . . . Their idea was that it was not a perfect place for a pond. It’s perfect just like it is. It’s a perfect little wetland of an acre or less. . . You have a marsh, which is basically grass space, a little bit of a swamp, which is basically made up of woody plants. You have all these—you have these three springs. You have some trees up on – up above it that form a nice, little forest. How could you find a better place just as it is? So then we had this deal. We had a group of kids who really thought that was true. We should make it into a nature study area, however, we had about six or eight boys that just wanted to get the bulldozers in there and dig that place out and who cares.

Thomas laughed at his memory of the enthusiasm the boys had for the bulldozers. He finished his story saying,
There was a lot of conflict there . . . And finally; we came to a compromise that everyone was pretty pleased with it. And the last day of school, we did start to build a pond . . . But the kids arranged—I didn’t. In fact, some of these people I didn’t even talk to before they actually showed up onsite. But we had people there with bulldozers and a backhoe. And we had people from the school district there with tractors that would go back and forth over the new dam that we were creating to pack it down. The kids were helping with the surveying. We were kind of rotating them in and out . . . Some of them were doing stuff back at [school] because we couldn’t have 25 kids there all at once. But they had a plan where every so often a group of them would show up and we had—they were helping with the surveying and different things that were going on . . .

As Thomas left his memory of a pond being constructed by small hands so many years ago he refocused his story on the cornerstone of his democratic educational practice: trusting students.

Trust Students

For Thomas, trusting that his students were capable of participating in their educational journey was an important part of being a democratic teacher. He shared that he most appreciates his ability to trust his student’s insights and contributions. He explained that,

I think the thing [I most appreciate about myself is] trusting and appreciating students. I still tell people how when I worked with fifth grade students sometimes I would come into the room with this fantastic idea and present it to
them and it was not where they wanted to go and we’d start talking about it . . .

and by the time we were done, we had something [new] . . . we were going do and it was like I couldn’t help but agree that it was a lot better than my original idea. I guess just the fact that I can realize that even young kids can have fantastic ideas, that the mix to ideas comes up with something better than even the professional can do . . . I think that’s the premise of a democratic education. The most basic thing is that you come up with a better end result when you do share power. It is about power and who has it. [As a teacher] it is scary to give it up. [However, by] giving up some of that power, you gain a lot in the way students and student achievement. I think I can show that with my classes back then.

Thomas remains a teacher, who values the ideas, and thinks of his students. As a democratic teacher Thomas managed his classroom in a style that demanded participation and encouraged student commitment to their learning.

Classroom Management

Through his democratic approach Thomas thinks he was able to better serve students as a teacher. His democratic values influenced all areas of his teaching, including his management of student conduct. Thomas noted that through a democratic process,

You gain a lot of student achievement, student commitment, and positive behavior. Because all of a sudden, it’s like as soon as I started doing this [teaching democratically] my whole attitude toward discipline had to change because for [a given] project to work, I needed them to buy into this and to want to work on it and to be committed to it. If I take a kid out in the hall and ream
them for misbehavior, he’s gone. He’s not going to be—he’s not going to walk back in there and say, “Okay. Now I have to give this my all.” So it became not that I have to control students, but if we have a problem, we have to work through it as a class or between myself and a student, or a group of students. I mean, how are we going to work together so that the project goes forward and the kid learns something? I guess that becomes the emphasis rather than, “You have to behave in this way.” And the fact that they want to be there doing what they’re doing and it has some meaning to them beyond just turning something in and having a teacher say, “Oh, that’s an A” was important.

Thomas talked about his trust and belief in his students in a humble and easy manner almost giving the illusion that his teaching style could be easily and effortlessly imitated. It was easy for me to forget that he had spent years thinking and practicing democratic education. It was clear that he had honed his craft over time in the supportive and collegial environment of the Roundtable group. Additionally, he had work for over thirty years in a rural Appalachian Ohio district. Thomas seemed to genuinely love working with his students.

_Appalachian Ohio_

Thomas has spent his entire career teaching in rural Appalachia Ohio. As he talked about his teaching experiences in the region several important points emerged. These included: a strong value being placed on education by the families and their desire to have some input into the education their children. However, he talked mostly about the people of the region and the cultural qualities that make his work special. He noted that some of “our kids and families are extremely motivated to do well educationally.” As a
democratic teacher Thomas thinks that his approach works well with families from rural Appalachian Ohio. “It’s just that kids like it when they feel they have some control over the situation when their needs and desires and opinions are valued. And I think families like that too.”

As Thomas talked about the people from his district he smiled and added that they are “very independent, especially regarding ‘outside’ influences.” Thomas explained,

One of the things people don’t like is for someone, especially from the outside, to move in with a bunch of ideas and they’re going to change everything. But I think a lot of what we did [the Roundtable teacher] is we drew from the interests and needs and desires of the kids. And I think we got away with some things that maybe we wouldn’t do if we’d tried to just impose something on them. I think we got more of a commitment. And I think parents . . . saw their kids excited about school and I think they liked that . . . there wasn’t as much that they felt the need to push up against.

Thomas also noted that his students often did not come from academically strong backgrounds.

As a result they did not always see the long-term value of an individual assignment. He said,

I guess the other thing is you’re dealing with a group of kids who don’t necessarily see a lot of value to real academic stuff. But if you’re actually doing something where they’re using it, then they do see the value and they can accept maybe some of this other stuff that it’s a little harder to show that an immediate
usefulness for, that they’re a little more accepting of that ‘cause they say, “Well, I do need some math. So maybe because I need all this stuff, maybe it’s okay to learn this stuff.”

This last point turned Thomas’ story to the high staked standardized testing movement.

*High Stakes Testing*

For Thomas a teacher can help students learn in one of two general directions: a collection of unrelated or loosely related ideas or through an immersed experience that uses many skills. He explained

The fact is that the tests and preparing students for the tests have become so important. And people—I think there’s two ways to look at this. One is the test is the only thing that’s important, so we got all these little discreet skills and knowledge and we have to teach those. That’s what the kids have to do. And the other is would be to say, “Well, we just—we have to have kids who use their minds well and have been immersed in using all these skills and knowledge and are used to figuring things out if they don’t know them rather than just saying, “I know it. I don’t know it.” We’ve gone the first way. I think the second way would be better. I think the second way has always—it builds on what has always made our country great, the ability to look at things and figure them out. And it’s not just—I don’t know. I just think that we’ve gone the wrong direction. We’ve killed student initiative. We have said that kids and communities are not what is most important. I don’t think we have to have taken that route. I think we could live with the test.
Thomas believes that the tests are hurting students and their development. In an effort to illustrate his point he offered a story about helping a student with an IEP take a reading proficiency test.

*High Stakes Testing Hurts Students*

Thomas noted that “The year after I retired, I read tests to kids who had IEPs.” For Thomas this was a frustrating experience. Acknowledging that the system had failed this student and with clear frustration he said,

So part of their thing was they got the test read to them. And I could remember the social studies test because it was stupid. They had this paragraph like five inches long probably. And they’re leading these kids off in this one direction and all of a sudden at the very end, they take a twist and ask them an entirely different question than what you think they’ve been wanting to ask all along. The kids are just totally like—they don’t know how to deal with it. And yet if they’ve had an education that taught them to look at things critically, to think things through, to see things as a problem to be solved rather than something to know, I think maybe they could have dealt with the test the way it was set up. But the way we’ve Been—the way we teach, buckle down for success, do the workbook page, know how to do this little skill, but don’t know what context to put it in, it just was something they couldn’t deal with.

For Thomas, a democratic teacher who values students and their experiences, the response of schools, teachers and administrators regarding making the test score the only measure of success is hard to watch but not as hard as it is to watch the students who
must endure this type of educational experience. He said, “I think the test is bad. But I think what is even worse is the response to the test, the way we think we have to prepare for it.”

Enhancing Democratic Education

In the area of helping others understand and practice democratic education, Thomas has several ideas including more research and helping teachers develop the skills to teach democratically. Thomas knows that his democratic teaching is successful; however, he acknowledges the difficulty in having his experience and judgment be seen as valuable in the age of standardized test scores. With a touch of hope, his voice held back his more visible frustration as he said,

I think it [democratic education] needs . . . more research . . . It really has a bad rap. People [value] direct instruction, [they say] “Wow. It’s all right there. They’ve got all the skills and knowledge.” Yeah. It is all right there. It’s all maybe more contained, more—I don’t want to say organized or tightly structured, but it’s easier to see and deal with, I guess. And yet when the kids come out of that, I’m not sure they have nearly what they have if they come through to something more democratic like we’re talking about . . . I think at some point, we’ve got to get brave and start maybe somewhat playing the game, doing some research and showing what the benefits are. I think if you have a real quality democratic program, your kids—the skills and knowledge they come away with and the abilities they come away with, the attitudes, just blow anything else out of the water. But we can’t point to anything and say, “Look, it’s true.” It also, I think would empower us to say, “Look, it is right there in black and white. We
can prove it.” I think a good program, a good democratic program, will surpass anything else that’s out there with kids.

As a democratic teacher Thomas’ teaching practice, thinking and experiences tell him he is correct when he says “I think a good program, a good democratic program, will surpass anything else that’s out there with kids.” However, he also knows that if teachers, administrators, students and parents do not have the chance to experience democratic education they cannot possibly value its promise. He noted that “probably the most valuable thing was people willing to go out into the schools and ‘do’ stuff like a Friday roundtable.” He acknowledges that it takes dedicated people to make a Friday roundtable work. He said “it wouldn’t have gone anywhere except there were a number of people who were willing to not only participate, but actively work to move things along.” For Thomas, schools should be places where dedicated, gifted teachers and students should be able to find the right path to educational achievement.
Joan

Introduction

Joan is a special education teacher who works inside a democratic educational framework. Her interest in the ideas and practices related to democratic education is strongly connected to her work as a special education teacher. She noted that she was working in a democratic manner prior to her connection with the Friday Roundtables. Regarding the Roundtables she said,

You know, it just happened to be what my personal philosophy was, and a lot of it came from the experiences I had with severely handicapped individuals and my realization of the . . . humanity and the value of all people.

Joan’s insightfulness related to her work with her students and her desire to treat her students with dignity and respect were major over-arching elements of her story. In addition, several other themes emerged from our conversations including her teaching history, her work with the Friday Roundtables, how her discovery of the philosophies of democratic education enhanced her work, her teaching experiences in Appalachia, what she most appreciates about herself as a teacher and several career highpoints.

Teaching History

Joan’s teaching story is one of purposeful action. As a special education teacher Joan has attempted to push for the rights of her students to be treated as equal and important members of the school community. Her teaching story includes her journey as a teacher as well as her understanding of current legislation and its application and her desire to “mainstream” her students by pushing for inclusion before it was mandated or fashionable. Over all Joan’s teaching story is one of a democratically oriented teacher
who helps her students reach their highest potential by removing as many obstacles from their path as possible. She wants each of her students to “blossom.”

Joan did not start her undergraduate education as a teacher in training. She was a psychology major and “special education was a second major.” After her graduation she “then taught for five years in a public school in a self-contained classroom for children who were, at that time, called educable mentally retarded.” With a quickness of thought that defined our conversation she added, “Now they call them developmentally delayed or cognitively delayed.”

Joan has an intensity of purpose that is subtle yet ever present. Her teacher story is also filled with self reflection and important realizations on her part that helped to shape her teaching philosophy. For example she shared the following story of her development as a special education teacher that became interested in democratic educational practice. She shared,

I came to realize that being mentally retarded doesn’t make you less a human being, and public schools—still in those days, kids were not allowed to be in the public school unless they had an IQ, I forget what it was, maybe 65, but then they were in segregated classrooms. And it just became really important to me, and I guess this is where the democracy in education comes in for me, is that all human beings have value and it is important that we recognize the talents and contributions that—that anybody and everybody can make.

The simplicity of her statement “that all human beings have value and it is important that we recognize the talents and contributions that—that anybody and everybody can make”
is easily lost in the complicated systems of education surrounding those students who are not like everyone else.

_Inclusion_

Joan’s first five years of teaching were spent in a self-contained classroom where her students had limited interactions with “mainstream” children. She noted that “They even had their own physical education and their own art class. They were not with the regular classroom students at any time.” For Joan this was unacceptable. She explained that she worked, inside of her schools administrative system, for positive change that would benefit her students and all students in the school. She shared,

Even though they weren’t severely mentally retarded. They were just mildly retarded, but they still were segregated, okay? I worked with some teachers and started talking to them about how important it was for these kids to start to interact with other people, not just with each other. There were only 12 students in my classroom, age’s first grade through fifth. So they didn’t even have in that classroom many real peers. So, I thought they need to spend time with other students and I had a couple of people [other teachers] who became really good friends and we were talking about students, and I said maybe we could try having—and I picked one or two that I thought would be really successful, maybe they could join your class for physical education. So we decided to do that, and it went really, really well . . . As the year progressed, we decided, well, maybe the student could come in and be part of the social studies class, because they did a lot of things that were hands on and group oriented, so we did that . . . so by the time I left, we had three or four students who were spending at least physical
education and art with the regular classroom, and a couple who were also going into the regular classroom for social studies and science.

For Joan the importance of having other teachers welcome her students into their classroom was a major victory. Soon after this started to happen Joan took some time off from teaching. She said, “At that point is when I started my family, so I didn’t go back to teaching full time . . . so mainstreaming was what that was called. The kids were home based in a special education classroom, but they got to go out and visit.”

_New Legislation_

For Joan the work she had been doing in her school trying to mainstream her students was validated in a public way the year after she left her full time position. With an enthusiastic tone she said,

The year that I took my leave, I took a TA [teaching assistant position] and taught [at a local university] and got my Masters degree, was the year that 94142 passed, which was the forerunner of today’s legislation. And that legislation said that students should be mainstreamed, so in fact the law then said students had to do exactly what we had been doing the last few years. So they still were in homerooms that were special education classrooms, but they were allowed and had the right to go in and visit the regular classroom for, you know, whatever amount of time during the day that they could handle.

For Joan this was an important time in her educational journey. She noted,

So the – the biggest thing for me when I did mainstreaming before mainstreaming was mandated, was the personal relationship that I developed with the teachers
and the support and encouragement that I could give them. And when I saw what
a difference it made in the confidence of the kids who went into those classrooms,
you know, and the teachers saw it too.

Joan’s students responded well to being integrated into more traditional classrooms.

_They Blossomed_

After a year Joan returned to the classroom on a part time basis. With a crinkle of
emotion in her voice Joan remembered this time as both a moment of professional growth
and personal awareness. Regarding the legislative movement to mainstream she said,

And when I looked at that, I thought, yeah, we’re backwards. We’re saying to
these kids, “Well, if you measure up, then we’ll let you go into the regular
classroom,” and that’s – they were never going to measure up. So the following
year we tried inclusion, and I still was really concerned, because I didn’t want to
put kids in a situation where they failed or they felt inadequate, and that’s not
what happened. Okay, what happened was they blossomed, okay, and it was the
peer relationship, it was a part – being a part of a community that gave them the
strength – and the other kids accepted them readily, much more readily than they
did when the kids just came in.

It was at this point in her teaching career that Joan joined the Friday Roundtable group.
The Roundtables had been meeting for “awhile” before she joined.
The Roundtables and Democracy

Joan’s participation in the Roundtables was sparked by her fellow teachers’ enthusiasm for democratic education and her own ideas about what education should look like. She shared,

I came to know people who were in that group [the Roundtable], and then that’s how I came to realize that was my philosophy [democratic education]. You know, I hadn’t thought about it as democracy in education, and I didn’t have the background in terms of [my preparation]. Of course you do study a little bit, when you go through a Masters program, you know? But, the more I talked with these people and heard what they said, and they were personal friends, because at that time I wasn’t teaching full time in the public schools, because I took 10 years off to raise my children and just worked part time. But the more I heard them talk, the more I thought about the ideas . . . and what it was about, and it’s bigger than even what I had been doing.

For Joan the Roundtable’s democratic educational approach helped give structure and definition to her teaching philosophy.

Democracy in Education Defined

For Joan democracy in education is multifaceted. She offered her definition which includes student and teacher responsibility, building community, respect and dignity, her passion for teaching in a democratic way gave vibrancy and energy to her words.
So I think a major thing is insisting that kids treat each other respectfully, and again, not by punishing them when they don’t, but by having an ongoing dialogue about the consequences of what we do and how people feel.

It was clear that the substance of her response to “what is democratic education” was her actual way of being with students; not just a rhetorical and calculated response to a researcher’s question.

For Joan the bare essence of democratic education centers on the notion that all students are important. She said, “All students are capable and all students have value and all students have the right to be educated.” Joan also works hard in her classrooms to “establish a community where you involve the kids in establishing the rules.” Regarding classroom management in her democratic classroom she holds both herself and her students accountable. She shared,

I also hold children responsible. I also hold myself responsible. You know, there are curriculum guidelines and goals that we have to teach. There are specific skills that are part of the curriculum and this is what education is. But I think you can do it in a lot of different ways, and I think you can enlist kids’ ideas for projects and activities, where you’re learning how to read, you’re learning how to write persuasive pieces, you’re learning how to write thank you letters, you’re learning how to compare and contrast, but it can be around a topic that is of interest and meaning to the kids.

Valuing students, engaging students and helping students succeed are all important parts of her role as a democratic teacher.
Joan also noted that community in her school and classroom is an important part of her democratic work. She said,

The other thing that I think is really important and we do in my school is, you know, the building the classroom is the students’ community. In fact, right now there’s a sign on the boys’ bathroom door that says, “take back our bathroom, keep it clean”, you know, and the student council put that up because there had been some, you know, trash thrown around and the kids not being very respectful of property in there. And I think instead of punishing kids or, you know, making threats because the bathroom’s messed up, that you get the kids together and say, you know, you see this is a problem, and most of them will go, “Yeah, we don’t like to go in there and, you know, what can we do about it and how can we all try to improve the conditions of our school”. . . So, you know, I think the kids being given a voice and really listen to. I mean, when I sit down with a group of kids and say, “What kind of agreements do you think that we need to have in our classroom so that we can get along together, that we can enjoy learning, and that we can have fun.”

Joan said with a smile, “I’m not just doing it just to be doing it. I listen to what they say and I write it down.”

**Non-Democratic Teachers**

Joan’s decision, as a democratic teacher, to listen to students from a place of dignity and respect is not always shared by her fellow teachers. An expression of
dissatisfaction and disappointment stretched over her face as she shared this reality. She said,

I think teachers have to be leaders and they have to guide kids and they have to maintain, you know, decorum and safety, but I think the way we speak with kids is really important, and I think the tone of voice should reflect respect for the individual, rather than degradation. I have seen, I’ve been in classrooms and I have seen teachers say things with that tone of voice that is, you know, very negative, very derogatory, and I just see kids melt. I mean, they just shut down. So I think just because they’re younger and don’t have as much power because they are not the adult, they still are worthy of being treated respectfully, and it sets up a model for kids to treat other kids more respectfully.

Joan’s sincerity seeped into the fabric of her story. For her, as a democratic teacher, the modeling of respect and fair treatment with her students spills over into the student’s treatment of each other.

As Joan talked about democratic education’s promise of civility and respect she noted that students often need to learn these practices from their teachers. She shared her experiences,

I have said to children, I’ve had some kids who’ve had some pretty severe behavior problems, who have a very negative, very threatening tone of voice or just very flippant, and I’ll look at them and say, “You know, I would never speak with you in that tone of voice, and I don’t want you to speak to me in that tone of voice.” But if I would just use the same tone of voice that they’re using and just because I’m bigger and I have the authority, just to make them back down, they
haven’t learned anything except that as soon as they get bigger, they’ll have more
power and more authority and they can use it too. I want them to learn ways of
negotiating, ways of resolving conflict in a respectful way, and that’s all—you
know, it’s not something that you can just say, and we have a really nice program,
the Appalachian Peace Council, that comes in to help kids learn about conflict
resolution, but that’s not enough either. I mean, it comes from the way day in and
day out we live with kids, you know?

For Joan “the way we live day in and day out with kids” is from a place of respect,
valuing of individuals and community life. For her these are important elements of her
democratic walk with students.

As Joan’s descriptions of her democratic teaching in practice seemed to come to a
close she remembered a poem. Joan said, “There’s a poem by Dorothy Law Nolte and it’s
called “Living with Children.” Joan asked if I had “ever heard it” I had not. With a quick
smile she started to explain the poem. She paraphrased the first few lines “a child lives
with criticism, he learns to condemn. If a child lives with” she then explained the poems
meaning and its importance to her. She shared,

It goes through negative things and negative outcomes, and then it goes through
positive things and positive outcomes, and that’s been one of my credos from
before I even started teaching.

As she finished Joan said, “You know, I think I had that – I have a copy somewhere. I
will send it to you. True to her word she did. When the poem arrived in the postal mail it
was a copy of a well-worn original. It reads as follows:
Children Learn What They Live

By Dorothy Law Nolte, Ph.D (1972)

If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn.

If children live with hostility, they learn to fight.

If children live with fear, they learn to be apprehensive.

If children live with pity, they learn to feel sorry for themselves.

If children live with ridicule, they learn to feel shy.

If children live with jealousy, they learn to feel envy.

If children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty.

If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence.

If children live with tolerance, they learn patience.

If children live with praise, they learn appreciation.

If children live with acceptance, they learn to love.

If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves.

If children live with recognition, they learn it is good to have a goal.

If children live with sharing, they learn generosity.

If children live with honesty, they learn truthfulness.

If children live with fairness, they learn justice.

If children live with kindness and consideration, they learn respect.

If children live with security, they learn to have faith in themselves and in those about them.

If children live with friendliness, they learn the world is a nice place in which to live.
Joan seemed to hold the spirit of this poem close to her teacher’s heart.

High Stakes Testing and Democracy

As she talked about her democratic focus and her democratic practice our conversation turned to the outside influences on schools that could push her away from a democratically driven pedagogy. Joan offered her perspective on the impact our current high stakes standardized testing culture has on her democratic practice and her fellow teachers. With a reflective intellect and the tenacity of spirit that seems to define her work, Joan shared her understandings. She said,

I think my way of being with students [a democratic position] is the way it is. There are times that I feel like I would have spent more time, say, solving a social situation or spending time a little—away from the curriculum, because it’s something that is of interest to the kids and I think in the long run would be really helpful for them to be successful citizens. And I especially see it with regular classroom teachers. There’s less dialogue and less projects that are geared toward, you know, classroom community. You know, the things that happen now to develop a classroom community take much less time, and I think sometimes teachers feel pressure to get kids to cover more material and to go faster and to, you know, pass the test. And so I think that definitely has put an edge on teachers and the way they work with kids. And I don’t think it is true for all teachers, but I think some—I see some, especially in the younger grades, I see some teachers, it’s like they’re cracking the whip and driving the herd, instead of, you know, in kindergarten, you need to learn how to be nice to other people and you need to
learn that through living it, not just having the teacher say, “No, we don’t do that. Go sit over here.”

Joan paused and with pensive look continued saying,

I fear that teaching [community skills] is becoming a little less important for some people, especially newer teachers who feel under the gun to make sure these kids perform, and they don’t have permanent licenses. And many of them aren’t parents. You know, after I became a parent, I became a much more effective teacher in different ways. You know, there were things I did before I was a parent that were really effective that I kind of let go of, but there are things that I think were important. And so, yeah, especially the younger teachers, I see a lot less move toward democratic education and more—their focus is on kids being able to pass the tests.

Joan’s strong belief that schools help prepare students for their needed participation in their communities is at odds with the application of the current educational mandates by many of the teachers in her school. This reality was visibly concerning to Joan.

*Maintaining a Democratic Approach*

For Joan it is the students and her like-minded colleagues who inspire her to continue to work from a place of democracy, in spite of the current educational ideologies that might state otherwise. She said,

Many of the people I work with honor students and try to find value and recognition for all of them. I’m really lucky to work with, especially in the fifth grade—teachers who have the same philosophy. And other teachers who I don’t work directly with but who are in the building also have the same philosophy.
And in classrooms—you know, classrooms are small communities. You know, kids start in their families and then they broaden out to the classroom. Her belief that her special education students need to be integrated into the larger school community has given her teaching work a real sense of inspired purpose.

With humility earned through reflection and practice Joan explained how she has continued to develop her democratic teaching philosophy. This includes a belief in her students and their ability to accomplish more than she had originally thought possible. She said,

And so being in the regular classroom more, I’m with a greater number of students and a greater diversity, you know? And my expectations and my belief in what kids can do, even though they have handicaps, has gone up, and their achievement has gone up because we expect them to do as much as what everybody else does, with accommodations if they need them. So if a child is not a good reader, he’s in the fifth grade, you make sure that he has somebody, either a peer or, you know, a recording for the content areas like social studies and science. You don’t expect them to read a fifth grade textbook if they’re reading at a second grade level, but you make accommodations so that they get the information . . . and sometimes these kids are more determined and put forth more energy and are more motivated than some of the kids who aren’t special education or don’t have special education IEP’s. They really use a lot more of what they have.

Joan smiled as she said, “They really use a lot more of what they have.” This statement, seemed to inspire her to work harder for her students.
Joan thought for a few minutes about her work in Appalachia and her understanding of the region’s educational systems, its people and her students. She noted, “I really haven’t taught any place but in Appalachia. My only experience is my own, which was the corner of Appalachia. I’m not from that far away from here.” With this caveat noted, she offered a couple of other thoughts based on her experiences. Joan noted that many of her students do not automatically respond with a respect for authority. She said,

The kids don’t automatically have the respect for authority. They don’t—you know, some of them do, but there are a lot of them who say what they think and they express the opinions of their parents, and they say things that I think most kids who have been socialized in middle class families probably would know better than to say, you know? So, you know, you have a choice to make. You can either condemn them or punish them or tell them they’re wrong, or you can accept it and help them try to see other ways of doing things . . . And I guess a big thing is being aware that there are things kids need to learn because they haven’t learned them, but not to judge them or to see them as less valuable, just because their social civility is different than the mainstream.

Joan seemed to be uneasy talking about her Appalachian students as she compared their limited experiences to more affluent middle class students.

Most Appreciate

Joan paused for a moment before offering the thing she most appreciates about herself as a democratic teacher. After a moment and a quick chuckle she said,
One of the things that I think is really important and that I feel really good about is that I am open to students and I’m not threatened by them. If a student doesn’t do exactly what I’ve asked them to do exactly when I ask them to, I think as an early teacher, I felt a little threatened. I felt a little like, oh, I’m not in control here. If the principal comes by, what’s she going to think? . . . And I don’t have that anymore, okay? What I see is a child who maybe doesn’t know how to go about doing what he needs to do, but my reaction to him can either make it worse or make it better. And I think I’m really good at being able to hear kids and being able to respond to them in a way that demonstrates value and honesty, without putting them down. And I think I’m also good at being able to give kids feedback that let them know that they are valued, but what they’re doing is not fair to the rest of the group. So democracy in education isn’t just you get to do whatever you want to. You are responsible of the other people in the group, and I think that’s a strength that I have.

Joan’s focus on treating her students with dignity and respect and asking her students to do the same is a noteworthy effort that she clearly finds important in her work.

**Highlight of Career**

In a reflective demeanor that characterized our conversation Joan noted two points in her career that she would call “high points.” One of these was in her recent teaching practice and the other was at little further back in her teaching experience. She shared,

The most recent one is I was walking down a hall just a couple days ago and a little boy in the second grade said, “Hi, Mrs. Reader.” And I stopped and thought
about it. I don’t work with the second grade, but I worked with that child in the first grade. He doesn’t have an IEP, but he was having trouble with reading and he didn’t work well in a group, so I would go into the classroom and read with him for 15 or 20 minutes and did some reading instruction, and he learned to read last year in the first grade. And when he saw me—he knows my name, but it was like a slip of the tongue, you know? He associates me with him becoming a reader, and that’s an awesome compliment for me.

Joan smiled broadly as she told this story. She continued saying,

I had an incident many years ago. I had sprained my ankle and was on crutches, and we had a young man who came to our school from another school because his school wasn’t wheelchair accessible and he had to be in a wheelchair. And so his parents had him come to our school because we had an elevator. In the building he was before, he couldn’t be with the fifth grade class, so he came and was with us. He was a very inspirational young man. But when I sprained my ankle and was on crutches and I was using the elevator, well, he wheels into my room right before lunch, “Mrs. [Joan],” and he had a walker, because he could use a walker, “You sit down right here. I’m taking you to lunch. You hold my walker and I’ll take you down to lunch.” And so he takes me down in the wheelchair, takes me into the teachers’ lounge, wheels me up to the table, sets the brake and says, “What time are you finished? I’ll be back,” and he goes off in his walker and leaves me, you know, in his wheelchair. And I think that he felt free to do that. It says a whole lot about how he perceived me as a person as being respectful and responsive to him.
As she finished her story, which validated much of our conversation, she seemed both pleased and troubled. Before she left our meeting the source of her trouble surfaced, she said, “You know, kids want to feel important and be helpful and we don’t always let that happen in schools.”
Jill

Introduction

Jill worked as an elementary school teacher for more than twenty years. Currently she is in an administrative role at a large public university. Unlike many of the initial teachers associated with the Roundtable group, who had several years of teaching experience before joining the group, Jill joined the group as a newly minted teacher. The themes found in Jill’s story include: her teaching history, her understanding of democratic education, her work in Appalachia, what she most values about herself as a teacher, a time in her career when she was most content as a teacher and the importance of grassroots teacher organizations.

Teaching History

As Jill discussed her teaching history including her introduction to the Roundtable group, she explained how the Roundtable teachers she worked with at her first school seemed to be more settled in their work than she was initially. Aside from the professional development offered by her roundtable participation, Jill stressed the importance of the group in relation to their social friendships. She said,

Well, when I started teaching at [a rural county school] Elementary—I started in 1985, and . . . we had two separate buildings and I was in what we called the upper building . . . and some of my co-teachers up there who were more experienced [than me] and just had, I think, a better sense of what teaching was about informally began to mentor me. And so I was invited to . . . at some point, I don’t remember if it was immediate or what the time frame was, but as I became friends and established more meaningful relationships with these people, not just
because I was teaching side by side, I was invited to participate in the round table
discussions.

The Roundtables had a lasting impact on Jill as she developed her teaching skills and
teaching philosophy. Jill noted that when she started teaching, the teacher had more
freedom in regard to their instructional content than they do know. She said,

I mean, each year I think there were different hard parts of just being a good
teacher, depending on the number of students in the class, the personalities of the
students, the expectations maybe from the administration that certain things be
accomplished in a certain amount of time, the testing that we began to have to do .

.. when I first started, I think the teachers could pretty much do whatever they
want, pick whatever topics they wanted. I could teach whatever I wanted in
science or social studies and do it however I wanted . . . then it got a lot harder to
be able to be in charge of that . . . So even if you wanted to spend a lot of time
involving the students maybe in choices of what they wanted to study or how they
wanted to approach things, there was always pressure that, you know, you have to
be ready for this standardized test, or you have to complete X, Y and Z and turn it
into the principal. You have to be accountable. So the accountability piece I think
at times conflicted with maybe the way I would have done things if it had just
been here’s your room, teach the way you want to teach.

As she negotiated her first years as a new teacher Jill was invited to become part of the
Friday Roundtable group.
Roundtable Support

Jill’s Roundtable participation provided her, as a young teacher, with a place of support and encouragement. As she discussed these elements of her Roundtable participation a tone of appreciation and indebtedness came through in what she shared. She said,

I liked the feeling of being part of a group that really had the students’ best interest at heart, and I think all these people were dedicated educators. I felt very young then. I was sort of in awe of all of them, because they were all a few years older than I was. They had lots of experiences, and I was still new and sort of at times didn’t really know what they were talking about. I felt like they [the Roundtable teachers] were so, you know, loving and embraced me as being a young teacher. I think they all, you know, mentored me to some degree, especially Gail. I mean, Gail really did, and so I think the experience was incredibly positive.

For Jill the Roundtables served as an important place for her own development and growth as a teacher, especially in the area of democratic educational pedagogy.

Not Democratic

As a new teacher Jill did not define herself as democratic. Her undergraduate preparation did not prepare her to think of teaching as a democratic endeavor. She said.

I went to [large public university] and . . . I don’t, in retrospect, I don’t think that my preparation was as rigorous maybe or as good as I wish it would have been. And that’s, you know, totally in retrospect . . . When I started teaching, I was
probably, as most new teachers are, just sort of overwhelmed and [I] discovered lots of gaps . . . in my preparation . . . I didn’t feel that I really had much of an introduction to what democratic education was and how that translates into the classroom.

Based on her twenty plus years in the classroom and a questioning disposition Jill also articulated “gaps” between the promises of democratic education in theory and its practical application in the classroom. With a pensive look she said, “I guess I still feel that there is a huge gap between maybe the theory and the translation into the classroom.” For Jill the gaps in her theoretical understanding of democratic education and its actual application in the classroom are not easily dismissed or reconciled.

*Democratic Education*

Jill displayed a thoughtful gaze as she mentally explored the complex nature of defining democratic education. A smile crossed her face before she spoke,

Gosh, it [democratic education] is so multilayered. I know simplistically when I’m working with my students [in an introduction to education class to first year college students who are exploring teaching] and we begin to discuss some democratic ideas . . . we talk about John Dewey and we talk about progressive education. We talk about being student centered. Meaning the focus is on student and the teacher being the facilitator, rather than the person making all the decisions. Having the students involved, having choices, lots of choices. Those are the types of things that on a simplistic level that we talk about . . . and well, I think in theory it sounds fabulous.
As Jill talked about the potential and pitfalls of democratic education in the classroom, she became reflective. Her explanations of democratic teaching practice exposed the deep roots of her understanding, an understanding gained from the fertile soil of her classroom experiences using both democratic and traditional approaches.

**Democratic Education is Different from Traditional Education**

For Jill the differences between a democratic teaching philosophy and a more traditional teaching approach are clearly visible and distinct. She explained that,

I think one of the [differences] is the role of the teacher . . . The [democratic] idea of the teacher being more of a facilitator, helping the students create their own learning and discovering, a lot of discovery. I think that is different from the traditional teacher who . . . did lots of worksheets, used a lot of textbooks, a lot of lecture method . . . assessments were very standardized and it was sort of a one size fits all environment, instead of individualizing, helping each student learn from the point [or] place where they were and help them learn and differentiating the curriculum so that everyone had similar opportunities to make the gains that you would want them to make. So I think that’s a difference in my mind of the role of the teacher, definitely, and the expectation of the students and how they participate and their role of being an active participant, an active learner, rather than just the receiver of information.

Jill’s experiences with her teacher colleagues at school helped her to see more completely the differences not only between democratic and traditional teachers but also the distinctions among democratic teachers and their practices. She explained that “some of
the things that I know some of my [democratic] colleagues did . . . that they felt were ways that they were being democratic teachers, I didn’t necessarily agree with.”

Theory to Practice

In Jill’s experience several practices stand out as examples of the potential dilemmas that a democratic educational teaching position holds when it is practically applied to the classroom. She noted,

I like to have my classroom very organized and . . . I spend a lot of time establishing with the students what they could and couldn’t do within the classroom setting. So I spent a lot of time up front letting them know what the expectations were and adhered to that, and I think I had, you know, some very logical and natural consequences in place with a lot of student input into things that I felt, because I was teaching first grade, were appropriate. Some of my colleagues . . . I thought that they were missing opportunities for learning because the students were controlling what went on in the classroom to the detriment of their learning.

Jill noted that her democratic colleagues’ classrooms where often too “chaotic’ to allow all students to learn well.

Democratic Education and Classroom Chaos

As Jill discussed her fellow democratic teachers and her understanding of their democratic educational work, a reluctance to share her thinking filled her words. It was clear that she was not fully comfortable with being too critical of the people whom she had come to respect and value when she was a new teacher. She slowly shared,
In certain classrooms students had free range. They could get up whenever they wanted, they could go into the hall, they could go to the bathroom, they could sharpen their pencil, and they could pretty much leave, come and go as they wanted. And I felt that that was detrimental to the learning of the majority of the students, because there was a lack of respect for other students’ learning . . . And it was sort of under the guise of “I’m being and we’re being democratic.” The students have all the choices. And they ended up sort of controlling the learning environment . . . chaotic is a good word [to describe it].

Jill noted that at her first school she found most of the democratic teachers “tended toward the chaotic end of the spectrum . . .” As Jill talked about “free range” student classrooms she offered her understanding of classroom management from a democratic educational perspective.

Without hesitation Jill offered ideas about how a democratic teacher could approach classroom management. She said,

I would think that they would be a lot more open to student suggestion and student choice. If you walked into a classroom that just the physical makeup of the room would be set up to allow students to collaborate; there might be centers or work areas, as opposed to desks in rows and that kind of stuff, the teachers would be not standing at the front of the room lecturing. They’d be in among the children or even the students would be leading the learning. Just the whole physical makeup and the actions of the teacher I think would be very different than the traditional teacher who would be in charge of the front of the room, disseminating information.
Jill acknowledged that as a teacher she did not always know what was happening in her colleagues’ classrooms because “the nature of being a teacher, you’re isolated pretty much, so you get there and you’re with the kids all day long and you’re in your room, it’s really hard to collaborate and interact.”

Appalachia

Currently, Jill works in an upper level administrative role at a public university located in rural Appalachia. Her decision to leave the classroom was difficult and complicated by her desire to stay in the Appalachian region.

I’d been teaching for 20 years, and . . . I had a real struggle trying to decide [if I should leave the classroom], because I’m very committed to [this] area. I grew up here. I think there’s a tremendous need for good teachers, and it was really hard, and I’d been preaching that for so long and saying, you know, how important that was. So it was a very difficult decision to move, to change jobs, but I also was at that point in my career where I knew it was the time . . . If I was going to do it, that would be the time. So the first year that I was gone . . . my schedule was flexible enough that I went back and tried to volunteer weekly at the school, because I felt that that was, you know, a way to give back to the school, and I’m still . . . up on what’s going on and what’s happening and staying in touch with my colleagues.

Jill’s commitment to education in rural Appalachian Ohio has pushed her to ask new teachers difficult questions about their motivations to teach in this area.
I ask “Why Appalachia?”

As Jill talked about her work and life in rural Appalachian Ohio her passion for the region bubbled forth. With her voice seasoned with anger and her emotions contained but visible on her face, she said,

I always ask people how they end up here, and I’m just fascinated with that, because I’m here because my family is still here and I didn’t want to leave. I always thought I would leave, and then at a certain point thought I’m obviously not leaving, because my parents still live here. But, I think that we have such a unique culture, and it worries me that people don’t understand and that they make lots of assumptions because we’re in this maybe geographic area at this state that the students don’t have the potential that they do otherwise.

Jill’s “worries” about the assumptions people not from the region, especially teachers, make about people, especially students who are from the region quickly gave way to her feeling a sense of “distress.”

I have been distressed

The primary source of Jill’s distress centers on teachers not giving Appalachian students a fair chance to learn. Jill explained,

Well, I’ve been distressed, you know, at school with other teachers when they come up with excuses why the students aren’t learning. You know, the parents don’t care, they are in a poverty situation, so they’re never going to college [or college] isn’t an option for them or furthering their education [is not an option for them]. So things like that are really distressful to hear, and I think part of my
mini-mission has been to not let those dispositions or ideas or that kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, to always fight against that, because when I hear people say that, I have to kind of fight back and say [and or] convince them that those things aren’t necessarily true. I mean, there may be one family where a parent doesn’t care, but that should not be, you know, across the board. You shouldn’t think that about everyone.

Jill is quick to add that many of the teachers she knows who are working in rural Appalachian Ohio are very committed to the students of the region. “I think that a lot of teachers—the teachers that I know who are here and who are committed for a long term are—that’s part of it, they’re committed.” Jill believes that many of these teachers are teaching in Appalachia because “they want what’s best for the students and they’re willing—in spite of incredibly low pay and lack of respect from lots of people, that they’re committed to serving and working with the kids.”

**What I Most Value about Myself as a Teacher**

Jill paused for a moment in before offering a response to the question, “What do you most value about yourself as a teacher?” She struggled momentarily with the answer like a musician who has been away from her instrument for too long a period of time. She finally said in a crackling voice,

Probably the thing that I put the most time and energy into was connecting, building relationships with each and every student. And I especially—the unlovable kids were the ones that I tried to love the most, and I tried to go beyond the classroom, and it’s hard. I mean, there were kids that had really rough lives and things, and I was maybe a little bit intrusive in, I don’t know, offering to take
them to town or to get a haircut, that kind of stuff, or providing books and things.
I always tried to find the kids, and in real subtle ways, to support them, make their
lives better, and I think that’s probably what I’m most proud of.

As Jill finished the telling of this part of her story she seemed surprised by the tear that appeared in her eye. She continued saying,

I also looked at everybody very individualistically. I don’t think one size fits all at all. You try to, you know, seek out each student’s learning style, and one of my loves is literacy and books and I always try to kind of match up kids and books and genres and things that they like. I think I just looked at each child individually and tried to foster as much growth as I could and let them know that they were loved in my classroom . . . I have a few little mementos, you know, of students writing to me or making me a little book or writing a letter or [when they are] in high school, writing back to me and saying, you know, that I supported them or made a difference.

Jill noted that for her “those things are, like, okay, this is really worth it.”

*When I was Most Contented with my Teaching*

As a teacher Jill stated that she was most content during a period of time when she had a strong building leader and the school was working to develop multi-age classrooms in the primary grades.

*A Good Principal, A Supportive Principal*

Jill seemed energized as she talked about a period in her teaching career when she had a “very supportive principal.” She explained,
There were a couple years that we had done some research [as a school] and we had an incredibly supportive principal . . . And she was always pushing us [the teachers]. I didn’t always agree with her, but she was always pushing us and getting us to read and think and discuss and work collaboratively, and we worked on—we spent a couple years researching multi-age classrooms, and then we moved to that model. And . . . I had a first and second grade classroom, and for a couple years before that principal left, everything just gelled and we were spending—I mean, we had to collaborate. The teachers had to collaborate, because the team—we had a lot of convincing of the parents that this was going to be good for their kids, and we were just all on the same page. We had a lot of resources at that time.

With an expression of joy and satisfaction Jill added, “It was just a really an amazing couple of years.”

**Multi-age Classroom**

As Jill talked about the purpose and structure of the multi-age classrooms a depth of understanding emerged. She spoke from her position as a teacher who had experienced the melding together of theory, application and practice. She explained the structure of the multi-age classroom model they used. She said

I think we had first and second graders together and we had a class of second and third graders. So we were looking at kids’ [abilities], looking at the continuum of skills and [working on the] things that we wanted them to learn.
Jill explained that the primary grades were divided into the following classrooms: Kindergarten/First, First/Second and Second/Third. This arrangement helped to move students along at a pace that fit their individual learning styles.

Jill talked about the school’s desire to help students progress in their understanding of the content materials related to the first three years of school, not just one grade at a time. She explained,

Instead of [telling students] you need to be here by the end of first grade, we said, “These are the things by time you’re at the end of third grade we want you to know.” And so you might be a first grader and working on a typically third grade skill, and the way our rooms were set up, we could allow that.

Jill was visibly pleased with her memories of this period in her teaching career. With a smile she said, “It was very exciting. It was a whole lot of work. I’d never worked so hard in my life, because, you know, you’re not just teaching everyone’s on page 13 in the math book.” Jill noted, “We were teaching multiplication and division and one to one correspondence to the kids who don’t have that concept yet.” Jill explained that students were all learning at a pace that fit them, with the end goal of finishing third grade. She said,

So you weren’t in the first and second grade room. We tried to get totally away from any grade designation. So if you were in the primary room . . . you were just in there, and you could be in there two years or you could be in there three years, and no one really noticed because we were just a bunch of kids learning.

Jill’s emphasis on the image of “a bunch of kids learning” seemed to remind her of the opposition to the model expressed by more traditional teachers in the school.
Jill explained that the multi-age model worked well during the time the originating principal was at the school. However, she noted that some teachers did not like the multi-age model, but “because of the principal, I think that was a lot of it, and the majority of the teachers supported it.” Jill added,

We had a few naysayers who didn’t really like it, but they just got kind of dragged along with it. And they never truly embraced the concept, but once the principal left; [after] she took another job, we didn’t have the advocacy for that program, and things eventually went back to the traditional grades.

Jill was visibly saddened as she explained the school’s move away from multi-age classrooms. As if triggered by a memory from long ago Jill quickly defended the model’s educational merits. She said, “We still had [educational] standards.”

We Still had State Standards

Jill explained that the school’s use of multi-age classrooms did not mean that they lost sight of the district’s curriculum plan or state’s educational standards. With a strong sense of purpose she said,

We still had the standards. I mean, the curriculum was still there.

But we were going beyond that. We were empowered to go way beyond that. [A student still] needed to be at a certain level before they progressed, but the fabulous thing was there wasn’t the stigma of being held back. So if a student who is, you know, at first grade level wasn’t ready to go on to second grade, no one really knew, because they would just stay in the same room and keep working, and we called them the primary rooms.
Jill continued her story adding that she believed that the children in the multi-age model learned more than those in the more traditional model. She noted,

I think they learned a lot more . . . we were really out of the box. I mean, we weren’t saying, “You’re a first grader, so these are your spelling words, because you’re in the first grade.” We were looking at kids and if they were able to spell fifth grade words. We were, you know, working on those things. So it was just a much better way of looking at the whole child and looking at where they needed to be. And I think everybody learned a lot more.

For Jill the expectations of the teachers in the multi-age classrooms exceeded the expectations for learning put forward in more traditional classroom formats. She added,

We expected everybody to progress, and we had a really clear, in my mind, like, delineation of the sequence of skills, or the concepts or whatever that students needed to learn. So it wasn’t like you stopped—they learned the first grade curriculum. I mean, the sky was the limit. You were really encouraged to keep going and there was a lot of collaboration even across, you know, grade levels.

Jill was clearly enthusiastic about this period in her teaching career. She seemed to almost be back in her multi-age classroom as she said, “There were incredibly high [learning and teaching] expectations.”

*Grassroots Teacher Organizations*

Jill’s story returned to the Friday Roundtables and the grassroots nature of that group. For her it was an important part of her development as a teacher, a source of support, mentoring and connection. She explained,
I think there’s always the place for the small kind of family, grassroots organization that’s supportive in mentoring teachers. It’s more of a kind of intrinsic need that certain teachers or certain personalities have, to get together and have some—well, and a lot of that is sort of problem-solving too. They’re talking about specific students, specific circumstances. It’s very specific to their own classrooms, and I think that’s important for teachers to have [a local group if they] need help right here in [their] room. That’s the type of the really close knit [group we had], where you have folks who know, who know your kids or know the types of kids that you have, or the type of situations that you’re dealing with. That’s really important.

As she finished talking she was reflective and thoughtful adding, “But it takes some sort of leadership to get that going, leadership and commitment. In certain circumstances, there’s no one to take it on, because there’s so much going on in our busy lives.”
Tina

Introduction

Tina has worked in public schools in rural Appalachian Ohio for almost thirty years. She has been both an elementary and middle school teacher. Near the end of her career she worked as a middle school guidance counselor. Tina retired from teaching about three years prior to our conversation. Several themes emerged from her democratic teaching story. These include her teaching history, her work with the Friday Roundtables, a highlight moment in her career, how traditional teachers respond to democratic teachers, her ideas about democratic classroom management, her thoughts on high stakes standardized testing, her observations about teaching in the Appalachian context, what she most values about herself as a democratic educator and her hopes for democratic teaching.

Teaching History

Tina’s decision to become a teacher was very natural for her. Regarding her choice to peruse a career in teaching she simply said, “There’s a lot of teachers in my family.” Her decision to teach was also influenced by one of her teachers. She shared,

My fourth grade teacher I absolutely loved and I went to a small high school, and when the teachers had meetings, they used high school students to cover their classes, believe it or not, so I used to get to go down and cover her class and I really enjoyed doing that. I liked the idea of having summers off, so then when I was a mother I’d be home with my kids during summer.

Tina is also married to a teacher. It was her husband, Thomas (who was also interviewed for this study), that encouraged her to attend the Friday Roundtables. She said, “Thomas
actually became involved in those before I did. I kind of started going just because he was going.” She placed an emphasis on the word “just” noting an initial indifference to the Roundtable.

\textit{Friday Roundtables}

Tina does not consider herself to be a theoretical person. She said, “I’m not a theoretical person . . . I’m a really hands-on person and I have to just try it to see if it works.” For her the ideas of democratic education as discussed by the Friday Roundtables were not as important as the practical application of those ideas in her classroom. This distinction, between ideas and practice, is important to Tina for two reasons: it caused her to be more cautious about “buying into” the ideas of the Roundtable and once she did buy in, it made her a more committed practitioner of democratic educational pedagogy.

\textit{I wasn’t Sold on Everything}

Tina noted that she does not see herself as having been a progressive or democratic teacher during her early Roundtable participation. Specifically she said, “Well, I didn’t buy everything they [the Roundtable group] said hook, line and sinker.” Tina noted that she was often uneasy about the group’s discussions because of her own internal critique of the practicality of the group’s ideas. She noted, “I kind of sometimes felt kind of hypocritical sitting there because I didn’t agree with their conclusions, and they just made the assumption that everybody did.”

As an example of what she was describing and not completely agreeing with the group, Tina talked about her work as a literacy teacher and her simultaneous participation in the Roundtable. Specifically she said, “The biggest problem I had was all the Basal
bashing.” Tina remembers the group having a strong distain for the Basal reading text. She said, “They [the Roundtable] really didn’t like Basal textbooks. They thought those were the worst things in the whole world and that nobody liked them and nobody liked the stories, and I didn’t see that.” Tina noted that she did not see the Basal reader as the issue and therefore, “I didn’t think they needed to throw out the baby with the bathwater, I guess.” Regarding the Basal text and the broader issue of how best to teach literacy, Tina noted of her Roundtable experience that, “it was either all or nothing . . . [either] you totally agreed with whole language and nothing on the other side . . . you couldn’t blend the two together.”

Tina shared her story of how/why she was reluctant to not use a text book to teach reading. She said, Well, it scared me to death. It was, like, well, if I don’t have my textbook . . . when I first started teaching, we didn’t have good courses of study. So, like, if I didn’t have the textbook, I wouldn’t have known what I was supposed to cover each year . . . And the courses of study got better and I did get farther away from the textbook . . . I’d cover what was in the textbook, but the way I wanted to cover it, instead of necessarily the way the textbook said. One of the teachers at our school had a good way of saying it, because he likes textbooks because it kept him grounded from wandering off too far on his own, and it kind of gave him a base of operation.

Regarding the other Roundtable teachers Tina humbly added, “Maybe they just didn’t need guidelines as much as I did . . . or as much as I felt like I did at the time.”
Tina eventually moved away from her primary use of a literacy text to help her students learn to read and read well. She noted that “I took little steps. I think they [the Roundtable] wanted people to, you know, leave here and jump to here, and I couldn’t do that. But I took little steps and I think I eventually got to there.” Regarding the overall movement in her teaching style and philosophy Tina added, “And maybe I stayed there longer than some of the people that jumped and couldn’t handle it [being democratic].”

Tina appreciated her work with the Roundtables; however, she was not always easily convinced of the group’s theoretical direction or its practical conclusions. Regarding her roundtable experiences she noted,

I think I probably got a lot of good ideas from the Roundtables, but I did sit there feeling like, oh, I hope nobody can read my thoughts and realize that I don’t really hate Basal books all the time and I’m really glad I have my textbooks.

_I am a Democratic Teacher and Maybe More So . . ._

Tina defines herself as a democratic teacher. She also noted that, “and I think I’m probably – my classrooms were probably a lot more democratic maybe than some of the people [in the Roundtable] that were really sold on everything.” Tina shared her story of becoming a teacher who is strongly committed to the ideas and practices of democratic education. Tina noted that earlier in her career she felt pressured to ‘maintain control” of her classroom, so she attended a seminar by the “Behavior Change Institute.” She shared her story,

Early on, the first year I taught, the summer after the first year I taught, the guidance department had a program called the Behavior Change Institute. And
they paid you to come . . . so I wanted to come get new ideas . . . Well, the whole institute was how you can’t change your kids’ behavior, you have to change your behavior. And then you had—to affect change in yourself [as a teacher] to get what you wanted out of the kids. It was wonderful. It was really, really good. And I think from that experience on, I really tried to engage the kids and have them feel like the classroom was our classroom . . . I wasn’t the dictator, spilling out all this knowledge, that they had a part in it too. And we had, in the beginning, we called them magic circle, where we talked about classroom meeting or issues and things . . . because of my fourth grade teacher, she was so wonderful. She’d say, “Let’s hurry up and get all this work done so we can do something fun,” and we had all these extra projects that we did. We had a circus, we had an Indian powwow, and the circus was, like, a big deal. We made all this stuff for it and had different acts and everything. She just made learning so much fun, that she really inspired me to try to do that with my kids and try to do projects that were meaningful and worthwhile. For example, when I taught Ohio history, we did a project. The kids had to come up with a vacation plan for a two week vacation in Ohio, and they had certain criteria that they had to meet and stuff. And then I put it in our school newsletter that we had all these on file if anybody, you know, was going to take a vacation in Ohio and wanted to look through them, they were welcome to, but to try to make it more meaningful to the kids’ lives.

For Tina, the Roundtables helped to cultivate a teaching approach that was already being developed in her practice.
Career Highlight

As Tina talked about her democratic educational practice and her democratically positioned teacher philosophy she remembered a time in her career that she was most pleased with. For Tina, a person who describes herself as not being a theoretical person, this story is laden with democratic educational ideas. Tina’s story seemed to flow from her and she appeared to genuinely enjoy its telling. She said,

It was towards the end of my career and we went through a period when everybody was supposed to do multi-age, and they focused mainly on the primary grades and teachers had to decide whether they wanted to [have a multi-age room]. It was the big thing . . I was teaching third grade and they were starting the multi-age class with first and second grade . . . Well, when the principal put me in fifth grade, she said, “I’d really like somebody in the intermediate grades that understands multi-age and knows more about what it is and everything.” So we decided that we would try doing a multi-age fourth and fifth grade classroom, and . . . we combined our classes and we had one class. We had two rooms and we split different times during the day for things, but we considered it one class. We didn’t talk about fifth and fourth graders. We didn’t even talk about older kids and younger kids. They were just our kids. We all met together in the morning for an orientation. We’d sing a song, read a picture book, and have announcements, things like that. And we grouped the kids based on where we thought they could learn the best. We didn’t worry about whether they were fourth graders or fifth graders. We grouped them for math differently than we grouped them for reading, differently—and for science and social studies, we just randomly mixed them.
And we did fourth grade curriculum one year and fifth grade curriculum the next
year, topics . . . So we had some kids that we made a big deal with at the
beginning of the year, you know, explaining our rationale, why we were doing
things the way we did and we didn’t think anybody was stupid or anybody was,
you know, especially in one group because they were so much smarter. It was just
where you could learn the best, and we didn’t care what age they were or anything
like that.

Tina paused for a moment and then continued,

And we even had a story that we read to them the first year called The McGills. It
was about a family that had, like, I think six kids that all had a cough, and their
coughs were all for different reasons, but they wanted to be fair, so they treated
them all the same. They gave them all cough syrup or something and some of the
kids died because they had pneumonia or something and it didn’t get treated and
other kids got better and other kids got—just to kind of enforce to the kids that
you can’t treat everybody the same way, because everybody doesn’t have the
same needs. So when we started that class, we set it up to be really democratic.
We had a class meeting every Friday. We had an agenda on the board that the
kids could write down things they thought we needed to talk about.

Tina talked more about the class meeting and how the children would make suggestions
for discussions. She noted that at one point her partner teacher suggested that they stop
these meetings. Tina shared,

So—and at one point, I think I was a little more sold on the class meetings than
the other teacher, because I’d been having them in my classes, and she said, “Do
you really think we should be taking the time out of studies for the class meetings and stuff?” And I said, “Well, why don’t you ask the kids and see how they feel.” They would have revolted if we had quit class meetings. That was that important to them. And it really helped with classroom management, because it wasn’t our class, it was their class, so they had a vested interest in keeping things moving.

Tina smiled as she talked about the investment the students had in their shared classroom.

I could not keep from sharing how very democratic this all sounded. Tina quickly agreed and she shared several points to help illustrate this more clearly. She said,

It was very democratic. We told the kids we had to be in charge because we were the teachers, so we said it’s kind of like we’re the president and we have veto power, because we are older and we know more what we have to have and everything. So we can’t let you make a class rule that you get to have recess all day long. I said we can’t even do that. We have—the principal tells us things that we have to do, the superintendent tells the principal, the state tells the superintendent . . . So has things that they—you know, that are not negotiable and stuff. So, as far as we can, we let the kids come up with the rules, and we had a rights and responsibilities chart, and if they—they had a certain right they wanted, we said, “Okay. Now what’s the responsibility that goes along with that?” They wanted the right to go to the bathroom whenever they wanted to, so the responsibility was that they wouldn’t abuse it. They wouldn’t be gone longer than they had to and they wouldn’t leave at a bad time. Like, they’d only leave—they wouldn’t leave right in the middle of the test or right in the middle of instruction or something like that . . . And we even had teacher rights and responsibilities.
Like, we had the right to leave the room in an emergency, but our responsibility was that we would tell one of the kids why we were leaving and where we would be and who was in charge while we were gone.

Tina added one more insight into why she so enjoyed her work in a multi-age classroom and it directly addressed student failure. She said,

We kept some of the kids for three years, and it was a totally different experience than repeating a grade, because half of our kids stayed anyhow. And by the end of the year, you kind of forgot which half of the kids were in—and some of the kids—one year we had three kids that stayed with us for a third year, and some of the kids that were going on to the middle school were actually jealous that those kids got to stay.

With a look of pure joy she added, “So it took out the stigma of not passing a grade.”

*Traditional Teachers Respond*

As Tina practiced her democratic educational philosophy, which for her was a natural extension of her own personal way of being with students, in her multi-age classroom the more traditional teachers in her school began to take notice. Linda noted that the notice being taken was not always collegial, “The real traditional teachers felt very, very threatened by it [our democratic approach].” She shared that,

When we started it [multi-age classrooms], it was when the whole school was talking about multi-age, and some of the teachers thought, well, we’d start it and then two more would join the next year and then the next year everybody would be doing it and stuff, and we never expected everybody to do it. We just wanted
to do it and we just wanted people to leave us alone and let us do it. And some of them felt really threatened by it and really, I think, subtly tried to sabotage it in some ways.

Her use of the word sabotage was purposeful and deliberate. She continued describing what she meant,

There was one point when we switched reading around and some of their reading kids came to me, because we were using a canned reading thing which I knew would drive me crazy if I did it. But so I got to have the kids that tested high enough that they didn’t have to have that and they could just have the literacy group where we could just use real books. And one teacher in particular, when the parents came in, she talked to some parents and they weren’t happy with it, and rather than sending them down to talk to me about it, [this teacher] said, “Well, I’ll take care of it. I’ll get her out of there and take care of it.” Well, the principal was out with a bad back at the time, so the assistant principal—yeah, she pretty much did. And they never did have to talk to me. I wrote them a letter and I’d had the girl’s older brother, and I wrote them a letter and I said I’m really, you know, surprised that there was a problem, cause we never had any problems when I had her brother, and, you know, I really wish you would have talked to me.

Tina added, “I am sorry to say, I avoided her most of the year”

*High Stakes Standardized Testing*

As Tina neared her retirement the legislation known as “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) was passed. She noted that, “The last year that I taught, I think it was the first
year that had started.” NCLB had a devastating impact on the school’s ability to continue to use a multi-age classroom model. Tina said,

That was one of the difficulties, was the whole testing thing, because we kept the kids totally integrated except [during testing] week. We had to split up the fourth and fifth graders . . . and in the beginning, the test week wasn’t the same, so we couldn’t test those classes in separate rooms. We had to have different activities. We had—basically had to have a week of teaching just the fourth graders while the fifth graders did their tests and then vice versa . . . Towards the end, it was getting harder and harder because of the push with the tests. I felt like no matter what I did, I wasn’t comfortable. If I taught to the tests, I felt like I was being disloyal to my philosophy of teaching, and if I taught so that I felt like the kids were engaged and enjoying it and learning more, then I felt like, well, but maybe I’m not getting as much information to them, so they’re not going to do as well on the tests and they’ll look like it’s their fault when it’s really mine.

I asked Tina, “How did you resolve this dilemma?” and her answer was swift and direct, “I got out.” She added, “I finally got to be a guidance counselor” and that was the role she was in when she retired.

Appalachia

Tina has spent many years teaching and living in Appalachian Ohio. As she shared her experiences in the region, one story stood out. It is about a fellow teacher who was not from the region and this teacher’s world view. In an introspective way, Tina shared both her fellow teacher’s expectations of her students related to science and her
own self understanding about the impact geography can have on how people see the
world. Tina shared,

The teacher I first started the multi-age classroom with wasn’t from the region.
She grew up in New England. I had never really realized how much growing up in
a different part of the country could affect the way you look at things, until I
student taught with her—or team taught with her. And just—it was little things,
like we were doing a weather unit and she told all the kids that they had to look at
the temperature every morning, and I said, “Well, what about the kids that don’t
have thermometers?” And she goes, “How many of you don’t have
thermometers?” and, like, half the kids raised their hands. So she says, “You’ll
just have to look at your neighbor’s.”

This solution to the dilemma seemed reasonable to the “New England” teacher. However,
it was not practical.

And I’m thinking their neighbors may live two miles away, but I didn’t want to
say something in front of the class, you know, right in a row. So I said something
to her later. She goes, “Really?” I said—because she grew up in New England,
where the weather controls so much of your life, everybody there has
thermometers. So she just couldn’t even hardly fathom that people didn’t use
them here in the same way.

For Tina finding value in what students bring to the classroom is part of being a
democratic teacher. In her work with students from rural Appalachian Ohio she was able
to find value in their sense of independence.
Tina noted that she enjoyed working with them because of their sense of independence and self reliance. She said,

I think democratic teaching with Appalachian students probably is more effective, because . . . Appalachians are pretty independent and don’t like to be told what to do. So that’s one way that maybe they’re not being told what to do, as much they’ve got more input.

Tina stopped for a moment and talked about the impact of poverty had on the lives of many of her students and the limitations poverty put up in relation to life choices. She quickly said related to her students’ intellectual ability, “I didn’t think of them as poorly performing students . . . they were just my students.”

*What I Most Value About Myself*

The thing Tina most valued about herself as a democratic teacher was that she tried to make sure her students knew through her actions, that she cared about each one of them. She said, “I like to think that every student I’ve ever had really knew that I cared about them.” She validated this saying, “and just from the reactions that I get from them when I see them, I think that it is probably true.” She paused for a moment and with a knowing laugh added, “There might be a few exceptions, but I think most of my kids knew that I really cared about them and I had their best interests at heart.”

Tina tried to accomplish letting her students know she cared about their wellbeing in several ways. She “tried to have time to listen when they needed to talk.” She also attended to their lives at school. She shared,

I tried to show an interest in them as a person, not just as what they could do in my classroom. When I was at the middle school, I went to one of the middle
school boys’ basketball games, and I had one of the—one of the boys walked clear across the gym, up into the stands to thank me for coming to their basketball game.

With some difficulty finding the words to describe the goodness of her teaching style she added,

I kind of—I always tried to be—you know how you always hear that kids that make it through adverse circumstances, and there’s always been somebody that believed in them, I always tried to be that person.

*My Hopes for Democratic Teaching*

Tina offered two of her hopes for democratic teaching. First she said, she wished “that kids would start school based on their developmental—where they were developmentally, rather than their age.” Tina added clarification to this hope, stating,

Not everybody’s the same at age five. Which was one of the advantages – one of the reasons I bought into the multi-age classroom, because this one principal explained it to me like first grade is the box, second grade is the box, third grade is the box. If you don’t get through the whole box in first grade, you’re a failure. Second year you’re in school, you may get through a year and a half, which means you would have passed second grade, but because you failed first grade, you’re still in first grade and you can’t—so it just—it sets kids up to fail.

As a democratic teacher who really cares for her students their failure is not an easy option for Tina to accept.
Secondly, Tina finds hope in the larger democratic processes found in a democratic school because it can “empower teachers to have the freedom to teach the way that they feel is most effective for them and their kids.” She shared,

Because, like, the teachers that felt threatened by our class, if somebody had forced them to teach like we were teaching, I think their kids would have suffered for it. And I think they were good teachers and I think their kids learned a lot. In fact, my son had one of—actually, both of my kids had—one had them, and they did fine. But for me, at that point in my career, I just wouldn’t have been happy that way.

In the end, Tina values democracy and its expectation that all people have valuable experiences and insights so much that she does not think all teachers should be forced (a most undemocratic idea) to teach from a democratic position. However, with a smile she said, “But, I think they [traditional teachers] should be encouraged to try new things.”
Toni

*Introduction*

Toni has been a teacher for almost thirty years. She has worked with elementary, middle school and high school age students in several different schools in two states (Ohio and Kentucky) and worked as a Department of Defense teacher in Germany. As Toni talked about her teaching experiences several themes emerged, including her teaching history, who she is as a democratic teacher, how she became a member of the Friday Roundtables, the practice of democratic education in her school, her work in Appalachia, and what she most values about herself as a democratic teacher. Toni is a “tell it like it is” kind of person; she has a sharp wit and a verbose communication style. The story of her democratic teaching journey is interesting and thought-provoking.

*Teaching History*

Toni comes from teaching stock. Both of her parents and several of her siblings were or currently are teachers. Regarding her decision to became a teacher Toni said,

Well, my parents were both teachers. And my dad, in fact, went into administration and went back to teaching because he said the reason he got into teaching in the first place is because he really enjoyed working with kids. And the whole learning process and as a principal he didn’t get to do that. But anyway, so they were a real inspiration.

However, as an undergraduate Toni was a communications major. After college her first Full-time job was in the fast-paced world of corporate retail.

With a laugh and a hint of acknowledged irony Toni told me the story of her first job and the lasting life lesson she learned from this experience. She shared,
I originally started out in the College of Communications. And I worked for a year, or almost a year, nine months, I guess, in Lynchburg, Virginia, as an assistant to the manager for a large mall. There were, I guess, about 80 stores. And I spent the year really working hard at that job. We were working almost 24/7 it felt like at times . . . But at the end of that year, I kind of stepped away from it. And I guess during the whole thing I would watch people come into the mall, people that you look at them and you know they can’t afford to be out blowing money, not that any of us can. And my job was all about trying to lure those people into buy things that I know that they didn’t need.

With a quick framing of her story she added,

None of us need most of the things that are in a mall. And I can remember my dad talking as I was growing up. And he said, “You know, when you’re looking for your life’s work, the big thing in life is to try to find something that will allow you to give back.

From this experience coupled with a love of the arts, cultivated during her high school experience, Toni decided to become a teacher.

After leaving retail, Toni returned to school and completed her teaching licensure. She noted that her undergraduate experience was uneventful and at times uneducational. She shared,

My undergraduate work [in education] was very traditional. I think I was out in the classroom twice before I did my student teaching. One was not even in a classroom. I met a middle school student at [the] Middle School after school one day a week to tutor them in reading. That was for my content reading, reading in
the content areas. And then I ended up in the back of a classroom at [the] High School for a quarter, just sitting in a chair, I mean, wasn’t even introduced to the class.

After she graduated Toni was hired to teach in a rural district in Appalachian Ohio on a temporary basis on a temporary license. She shared,

I got a job that wasn’t even in my field. I was hired on a temporary certificate for half a year to teach—to fill in when a special education teacher left to give birth. And as a sub . . . and so I subbed there for about a half a year, and then they hired me. They wanted to keep me. So they developed—they had me work with them to develop a program called “Life Skills.” And it included all sorts of things that we felt like kids that needed know, everything from very basic—well, writing skills and computer skills and public speaking skills and just about anything that you can imagine that wasn’t covered in other classes.

Toni, worked in her life skills position for a couple of years before moving to Kentucky and a new school. Toni’s move to Kentucky actually meant teaching in a larger school than the one she had left in Ohio; it also was an opportunity to teach in a high school. She shared,

And then, I moved to Kentucky, just needed to . . . I really wanted to teach in my field and I wanted to try high school. And it was a huge high school. It was kind of a painful experience. I did fine. I had a good time with the kids in my classrooms, but it was a tracked high school. It was 2,000 kids. You didn’t get to know anybody. The school’s administration was very much about divide and conquer with the faculty. It just wasn’t a community at all. It was pretty much
every man for themselves. So while I was there, I did the best I could. And while I
was there, I applied to teach for the Department of Defense overseas.

Toni’s decision to move to Germany meant that she was further from family, closer to
discovering a passion for democratic educational practice, and had a profound impact on
the way Toni now views education. In a reflective tone she shared,

I had an uncle that had been in administration in schools in Germany as I was
growing up, and I just thought that was such an intriguing idea. [As a teacher]

once you have three years of experience, they’ll allow you to apply. So I applied,

and I was hired to teach at a middle school in [a German town]. And I went there

and, again, it was a huge school, a thousand middle school students in one spot; if

you can imagine that. It’s scary. It was tracked. It was definitely a junior high.

They call them middle schools, but the concept was not there.

With a shrug of her shoulders she continued with a crafty smile that seemed to indicate

that more badness was coming. She said,

They handed me workbooks and spelling books and Basal readers and all of those

little things and basically said, “You have to make it through all of these with

your kids.” And of course, being the new teacher, I ended up with all the low-

level classes. That’s the way it works in a tracked school. As you’re there longer,

you get to move up.

Toni seemed to sense that I was not sure what her definition of “tracked school” was so

she added, “track  means that they’re sorted based on ability level.”
She continued her story by telling her understanding of how tracking really works. With clear disgust she said that “grades usually, just grades” determine how students are sorted. She said,

So there might be a really bright kid that just doesn’t perform for whatever reason, but ends up in a low-level class. But then a lot of times, you have kids that are struggling and they end up in low-level classes. Ironically, those I think are the kids that need the more experienced teachers because they’re struggling to begin with and they need teachers who come with all sorts of strategies and methods to help them learn . . . But in traditional schools, you serve your time teaching low-level kids. And as the old guard retires, you get to move up and teach the smarter kids. And what a horrible way to look at our teaching profession.

As backward as this system for Toni she remained respectful of students and decided to teach in a manner that did not harm to them.

The independent side of Toni emerged as she talked about her experiences in Germany. Finally, with a look informed by experience and common sense, she said,

So anyway, I spend a lot of time working with low-level kids and I kind of just threw the Basal out the window ‘cause I just thought, “This is ridiculous.” I was really searching for a better way to do things. And I really didn’t have anybody – well, my sister was, at the same time, teaching here [in rural Appalachian Ohio]. It was Toni’s sister and her sister’s experiences with the Friday Roundtables that gave Toni hope in her “Basil” filled classroom so far removed from rural Appalachian Ohio.
Finding the Friday Roundtables

It was with a strong sense of pride about her teaching sister and how their relationship influenced her thinking about teaching that Toni said,

By the time I left there [Germany], it was five years. So the second year I was there, between the two years I was there, I flew home to visit, and my sister was telling me about the work she was doing with [people connected to the Friday Roundtables]. It was awesome, and she was so excited about it. And the more I heard about [the ideas], the more I heard her talk about it, the more I thought, “You could do those things with middle school kids.” You can do that with them. So I ended up talking to Beth, who said, “Have you read any of Nancy Atwell’s books?” And I said, “Well, no.” And she said, “That’s who you need to read.” So I grabbed Nancy Atwell’s books and I took them back with me [to Germany], and I started reading that. And I started trying some of those things in my classrooms. And my low-level kids just started to really blossom.

The speed of Toni’s speech matched her excitement—an excitement that was as real now as it was all those years ago. Toni continued her story. With a quick smile and a hushed tone, as if she was sharing a very private secret she said, “But I’m doing this in secret because I’m supposed to be doing workbooks and Basal readers, right, [I just kept my door shut] . . . I was really pleased with the kids’ attitudes about things.”

Back to Appalachian Ohio

As Toni started to consider leaving Germany and returning to rural Appalachian
Ohio, her recent experiences in the classroom helped her frame the type of teaching she was not going to engage in. She shared the following story,

When I interviewed with the principal over the phone – this was a new principal, although she had been a curriculum coordinator when she was there. So she knew me. And I just talked to her over the phone and it was at that point that I decided I’m either going to teach in a way that I think is meaningful to kids or I’m going to quit because I just felt like I can’t lecture kids and torture kids the rest of my life. I just can’t do that. I just can’t stand up there and bore kids out of their minds.

As she talked the determination in her voice still held the power of her convictions about teaching and its purpose forged so long ago. She continued,

So, I decided that [teaching] is either going to have to be something that works, I mean, really works, or I’m not going to waste my time. And so I said that to the principal. And I said, “So there’s some things I want to try and I can give you sort of the name of the person that I’m modeling this off of.” She was fine with it. She was kind of like, “If you can defend what you’re doing, if you’re covering the curriculum,” all the things that administrators are concerned about. But otherwise, she said, “I don’t care how you go about doing it.” So I came back and that’s what I did. I set up a readers’ workshop in my classrooms, and writers’ workshops, and it was pretty much student choice, student choice with what they read, student choice in what they write. And you know we can’t always give them total choice of those things.
After making a few personal concessions regarding the school student tracking and large class sizes Toni settled into her new school, a new routine and new students with a fresh perspective on the potential of education. She shared,

> All the classes I taught the same way I worked with every kid individually. I really developed, I think—as a teacher, I sort of developed and got better and better at doing that. And the kids seemed to really enjoy it. I constantly had students give me feedback on how things are working and what we needed to change to make it work better. And I think because of that, they sort of kind of took some ownership in what they were doing with classroom structure was.

After she returned to the same area in rural Appalachian Ohio as the Roundtables she immediately started attending their meetings. She stated, “So when I came back, I got hooked up with them, and they were really a good support system.”

*I am a Democratic Teacher*

I asked Toni if she considered herself to be a democratic teacher and without a pause she replied, ”I do.” She quickly added with a robust laugh, “I’m about as democratic as I can stand to be on any given day.” She then talked about what democratic education means to her and what it looks like related to her educational practice.

*Democracy in Education Defined*

In what seemed to be a single thread of thought Toni shared her extended understandings of both the how and what of democratic education. Without losing her way and with clarity she offered the following understanding of the foundational elements of her democratic educational praxis. She said,
I like to sort of couch [it in the idea] that, in a democratic society, none of us gets to do exactly what we want all the time. There are always laws and rules. And I think the biggest—the biggest difference for me is that the kids have a voice . . . and I approach teaching and working with young people like this, kind of my rule of thumb is they’re adults in training. And I think early on, that’s kind of what Dewey and all the early guys had in mind, was that we have to educate our young so that they can be active democratic citizens in this country. They have to know they have a voice. They have to be able to read and think critically about issues so that they can vote and – on people that run the country. I tend to think about kids in that way. I think about them as adults in training.

Toni did not flinch as she offered her big picture understanding of the primary purpose of democratic education. As she spoke, the pragmatist in her came forward and explained how giving students a voice in her classroom actually works. She shared,

And so in my classroom what that means for me is that I—they do have a voice. I do talk to them with respect. I want to know—if there’s a problem, I want to get at the cause of the problem. For me, it’s about natural consequences of your behavior. It’s about everyone agreeing on what kind of an environment this room should be for learning and what that means for each of us as a member of this classroom community. And then we all need kind of reminders about that.

She continued,

I don’t expect the kids are going to be perfect every day. Nor do I expect that they are going to learn a lesson in one shot. And that’s academic, but it’s also behavior. And so the best I can do is coach them through things like that and coach them
through the sorts of thinking that they’ll need to do when they’re confronted with that again. So it isn’t just about this, “Here’s a rule. You broke it. Here’s the punishment.” It’s about, “So what were you thinking when you did this? And how’s that working for you? And what do you think a better way to handle a situation like that might be? Okay, good. Let’s move on and see if you can try applying that.”

Toni paused as if she were going to elaborate on her story and after a few moments; she noted that democratic education is about connecting with kids and helping kids connect with what they are doing.

*Connecting Kids with Ideas*

Specifically, related to helping develop academic skills, Toni hopes to use her students’ existing interests to push the process forward. With a confident nod of her head she shared,

> I think when kids are able to write about things that interest them and when they’re able to make some choices about what they read, or when you sit and talk to kids about what they’re reading, even if it’s from a basal Basal reader, even if it’s a short story out of a basal reader. If it’s not, “read this and answer these comprehensive questions,” if you’re really asking them to connect with what they’re doing in a very personal way, it’s much more enjoyable. We all feel that way, right? . . . If you can connect personally with anything you do, if it has some sort of meaning for your personal life, whatever that is, then you get—you kind of get engrossed in it and it means—you enjoy that.
Regrettably, Toni finds that many of the students in her school who are “lost” academically have been pushed to not be successful.

With a look of concern, Toni explained her position on why some children in her school are not doing as well academically as they could be. She does not lay the blame neatly at the feet of the students. As a democratic teacher she rises to the challenge of working with students that other teachers might move away from academically. She said,

There are kids that hate school because they are pretty sure by this time that they are stupid. And they’re pretty sure they’re never going to be successful because all their experience up to that point has led them to believe that . . . and so if you can sort of figure out how to give them real responsibility so they can pretty much step up to the plate and prove to themselves they can do it [do the academic work of school], I mean, I’m sure they can do it, but they are not. They’re not convinced. And it doesn’t convince them— and no amount of smiley faces or stars on their paper convinces them of that, especially when you’re asking them to do the sort of traditional uninteresting, non-thinking sorts of activities that we all grew up with in school.

It seems that the “traditional uninteresting, non-thinking sorts of activities that we all grew up with in school” has demanded that Toni understand the deeply rooted negative impact this type of education has on some students. It has also pushed her, as a democratic teacher, to not replicate its poison.

Some are Against Democratic Education

In Toni’s experience, as a democratic teacher, more traditional or teachers who
pursue the “traditional uninteresting, non-thinking sorts of activities” called school are often very cynical about democratic education and its practice. Toni shared,

I think sometimes the people that are so against democratic education are people that believe they know what it is and really don’t. And so I like to laugh about that because people will hear you say, “I believe in democratic education,” or “I teach democratic education,” or “I teach democratically.” And they kind of think that that means the kids run the classroom and do whatever they want.

Toni notes that as a result of not understanding the foundations of democratic educational practice some teachers become fearful of a democratic teacher’s success.

Toni shared a situation she experienced with a fellow teacher who seemed to be threatened by Toni’s democratic teaching style. Toni said,

I remember a teacher saying to me one time—she was kind of talking badly about what I was doing behind my back. And I finally just confronted her one day and I said, “I don’t understand what I’ve done to you. I’d like to know why you are saying these things about what I’m doing.” And she said, “Well, it really isn’t about you. It’s really that if this works, and probably will if you’re doing it, then they’re going to want all of us to do it, and I don’t want to do it. It’s too much work.” . . . That’s the kind of thing you’re up against. Teachers in those kinds of settings are very competitive. They want kids to like them. But they don’t necessarily want to do anything differently.

With a smile weighted by the telling of this experience, Toni added, “It’s interesting, you’d think a school full of teachers would be really helpful, and it can be. It can be that
way. But for me at that time, it wasn’t.” Toni quickly noted that often the school administrators are the most important ally or adversary for the democratic teacher.

*Administrators Matter*

Toni said that the impact the administrator has on the school’s structure is tremendous. For her the administrator [principal] is more than just a manager, they are the leader of the school. She explained,

> Whoever your principal is, they have got to be an educational leader. They’ve got to be— too many administrators in our business are managers. They manage behavior. They manage money. They manage teachers, schedules. They aren’t really focused on what the mission of a school is. It’s got to be the mission that truly drives everything else.

For Toni this is especially true of teachers and schools who are trying to be democratic. She said,

> We have to ask, “What are we about? What kind of student are we going to produce? And then who do we utilize our space and our time and our energy toward that goal, toward that end?” And it takes somebody who has a vision, especially when you’re headed into new unchartered territory.

Toni has worked most recently in a high school in rural Appalachian Ohio that has redeveloped itself with a democratic educational vision.

A few years ago the school’s principal took a leave of absence and subsequently the school’s democratic vision and practice began to leak way. Toni said,

> But a good example of what it means when you lose those kind of teachers, or leaders, is that he went for three years to California . . . and while he was gone . . .
we found another principal that we thought would come in as an interim principal, and he seemed to—although he didn’t fully get the whole idea, he just seemed like he would be very supportive of it and work with us . . . [but] he didn’t understand the whole concept of democratic education. He had no ideas. It was just really sad.

Toni was genuinely disappointed by the reality of the school she had invested so much of herself into. She continued saying,

It just falls apart too easily. And part of it is because teachers are in their classrooms all day, every day, working with kids. So it’s hard to have the energy to deal with the big picture. And it’s hard to have the time and it’s hard to get everybody together. And that’s why it’s so easy to divide and conquer. That’s why administrators on power trips can take over a school and make teachers afraid. It’s a sad thing.

So Toni took action to save the democratic ethos of her school. In a most democratic action, Toni called a meeting of the faculty. She shared her story with the zeal of a true believer, a person of conviction. She said, “. . . and we had a superintendent come in that wasn’t any kind of educational leader either. He was . . . very traditional, wanted everything to be very traditional.” Toni shared that the superintendent wanted to return the school to a more traditional model and do away with the democratic traditions that had been going on in the school. From Toni’s position the superintendent started to “try and conquer and divide the faculty” on issues like the number of instructional periods the schools should have and how much input students should have in the administration of the building. Toni shared that the superintendent would go from faculty member to
faculty member trying to make his argument for change. With an element of mistrust
Toni said,

He’d go to the next person and say, “Well, so-and-so thinks” – so I finally
realized what was going on and called a faculty meeting of just teachers and I
said, “We have to start meeting and talking again. We can’t leave it up to the
principal because it’s not going to happen. This is going to destroy the school.”
Everything that we’ve fought to have, which is a democratic school . . . now, the
superintendent, in my opinion, was all about power. It was about, “I want things
done the way I want them.” It was sad. It was really sad. But we fought it pretty
hard and [our former principal] made it back, so we kind of held it together.

For Toni the fight with her interim principal and her superintendent was worth having
because of the democratic nature of her school. In order to understand her school more
fully, Toni shared the story of why her school is democratic and how she has been able to
remain a democratic teacher for the last two decades.

_Democracy in Action: Myself and My School_

Toni has worked in her current school for the past fifteen years or so inside the school’s
democratic model and she has been able to maintain a democratic teaching approach for
all those years. In response to the question “How have you remained democratic?” Toni
shared the following,

Oh, working with kids that way just makes it more interesting all the time. I just
enjoy it. I think part of it is as a teacher, we often think of teachers as the
disseminator of information. And so how boring is it to stand up there and
disseminate the same information all the time. And yet, if you think about it in
terms of a dynamic relationship between student and teacher, I’m constantly learning things too. And I’m constantly kind of tweaking my methods and my strategies. To me, it’s a challenge of not teaching the material. It’s a challenge of meeting the group of students that I have, where they are, and taking that journey kind of together. And you get to know kids that way. In a block schedule, I have 80 minutes with my classes. When I first started teaching, I had 45 minutes. So I really get to know my kids. And because of that, I like them, as people and so they’re interesting. They’re far more interesting than most adults.

Toni is quick to note that her school and its democratic philosophy are important elements in her democratic teaching longevity. Toni quickly turned to observable instances of democratic practice. For Toni the school’s process for hiring new teachers stands out as an example of democracy in action. She shared the following story,

At our school, in order to interview for a job, you have to come in and spend the day and you’ll get to go observe a class being taught by one of our experienced teachers. And then you’ll teach a class while you’re being observed by people in the department. . . Whenever I’m in charge of that I have a teacher come in and teach in my classroom, then I always ask for those students in the classroom: their feedback on the teacher, what they thought about them. And then the teacher will then go for an interview with a group of students. We have any students in the building can volunteer to be part of the interview committees. . . So the kids will interview them and then they’ll come and they’ll be interviewed by a team of teachers. And so then at the end of the day, the faculty group will meet in one room. The student group will meet in another room. . . We’ll reach our decision,
and then we come together and kind of share what each group decided. Ironically, usually we’ve come up with the same decision. And if we haven’t, there’s always really good discussion around it and sometimes the kids are right and sometimes they kind of concede and say, “Okay, you’re right. That’s probably more important.” . . . And then the administration will offer the job to whoever we decide. So just from that experience, they [new teachers] come in knowing it’s a pretty different place.

*Appalachia*

Toni has spent the last twenty years working in Appalachian Ohio. It was clear that Toni did not see her rural students as a liability or inferior. She saw the promise in each of her students and leaned heavily on her democratic educational convictions to help educate them. In what I started to recognize as her candid style of communication, she shared her observations and experiences as a democratic teacher in rural Appalachia. She said,

I’ll tell you what, I think it’s easier with our students because—especially the group I work with at [our] extremely poor district. Seventy percent of our kids are on free or reduced lunch. Those kids see themselves as insignificant in the scheme of things in this country. And what we try to instill in them is that their voice counts as much as the next person’s. And I think they leave us having a voice. And that’s—we empower them, and that empowers me as a teacher. That makes me feel like what I do is really important.

Empowering students is Toni’s mission.
In her work in Appalachia, whose students are often defined by deficits, she finds teachers deficient—not students. She said,

It’s interesting because when I go to conferences or when I’m talking to people from large districts or districts of money . . . it’s like if you have money, you already come to the table with that sense of self worth. Because in our country, money buys power. And you got two things that will buy power: money or numbers. Right. And when I try to talk to large school systems about democratic education, what you get are the veteran teachers that have been there forever. They don’t want you to talk about it because they’ve got their plan book and they are going to use that every year, and they usually work their way up into pretty nice courses with all the highly academic students. I’m not saying their job is easier. I think content-wise, it’s probably tough. But they’ve got kids that have parents that care, that care about their grades, that care—I’ve never met a parent that didn’t care about their kid—but that are pushing their kids from home, that are saying, “You need to make good grades. You’re going to college. You don’t get – you don’t have a choice,” or whatever. And so those teachers don’t want to hear about it because, “I’ve got five, six years left. Mix all these kids together. With a sarcastic smile she finished her story adding, “Are you kidding me?”

For Toni the work of teaching, from a democratic place, in rural Appalachia does not just include an understanding of the economic conditions surrounding her students, their parents often limited educational background, and the hard scrabble nature of how her school is funded. It also includes serious self examination. In my mind Toni stands in front to the democratic educational mirror everyday and decides to teach her
students from a place of democracy, regardless of the effort it will require and the hard work it often demands. Toni knows there are easier ways to teach. But she is not having any of it. She shared her story,

It’s a lot of work to teach a non-track class. I’m planning for five different levels of kids in my classroom. So not only am I planning this lesson, but I’m trying to plan how to scaffold it for kids who don’t quite get it or can’t quite read or don’t write well. But the idea behind that in democratic education is that when we track kids, then you produce citizens that—a great majority of our citizens that have never been asked to read, never been asked to think about what they read, never been told they have the voice, never—I mean, they’re just dysfunctional citizens. . . So in a classroom, I’m constantly thinking about all these kids someday are going to be running the country that when I’m an old lady and I’m sitting around as an old lady and I’m hoping that they make good choices. So they’re going to be my neighbor. What do I want—what kind of a person do I want them to be? So we’re sort of about that. So it’s about—it’s not just about academics in class. It’s about how do you become a community and how does everybody in your school feel like they are as important as anyone else. Big schools, they don’t want to talk about that. They still want to process kids because for one thing, they’ve got thousands of kids. So it’s a factory. It’s a child factory basically. And they just want you to send them in and we’ll attach the headlights and leave.

Toni’s long walk with students down the path of democratic education is clearly designed to continue beyond the short hallways of her school.
What I Most Value about Myself as a Democratic Teacher

As Toni paused to think about what she most valued about herself as democratic teacher, I was struck by the difficulty this question seemed to create for her. It was clear that she thinks more often about her students than herself. Her answer supported this idea.

Toni said,

I guess it’s my love of kids and wanting to do the best thing for them. I see all the kids in my classroom sort of in the same light I see my daughter, and I kind of think if that were my daughter sitting there, what would I say to her, and that’s what I say to them. So I guess that’s it. It kind of keeps you flexible. You got to be flexible. You got to have a sense of humor. You got to approach it like it’s fun, not like it’s a job. I’m lucky to make a paycheck.

I think her students are lucky to have her as a teacher who brings a deeply conceived and highly valued democratic philosophy with her into the classroom.
Beth

Introduction

Beth has worked in various educational settings for the past 25 years. She was an early member of the Friday Roundtables and the Institute for Democracy in Education, a group that formed as a result of the Roundtables. She has worked in both secondary and post secondary educational institutions. During her Roundtable days she was a teacher at a small private school in rural Appalachian Ohio. Beth is currently working in a teacher preparation program at the higher education level. Several themes emerged from our conversation, including Beth’s teaching history, her Roundtable participation, her definition of democratic education, what helps keep her democratic, the importance of administrators and what she most values about herself as a democratic educator.

Teaching History

Beth came to rural Appalachian Ohio to pursue a Masters degree. She left her first teaching job in a large Southwestern city after two years in the classroom. Regarding her first two years in the classroom, Beth said, “It actually took me ten years to talk about my first two years of teaching because they were so awful. I was ready to leave the classroom when I moved here.” Beth noted that her first school was “the most undemocratic place I had ever been.” Beth explained her assertion,

I was witness to some pretty yucky stuff there, including teachers physically grabbing kids and throwing them up against walls to get them to do what they wanted them to do. I was known for being a good teacher because I could keep control of my classroom. I come from a family of educators. My dad was a
principal. My dad, you know, he had kind of an iron-fist approach, so I knew what to do to get people, you know, to behave, but I wasn’t doing any teaching.

With an unshielded honesty Beth said, “My kids were more humane than I was at some point. I mean I didn’t hurt—you know, I didn’t physically hurt anybody, but I wasn’t teaching them anything. It was all about maintaining control.”

Beth seemed to still be at odds with the teacher she was so many years ago. She shared a story that helped to illustrate her discontent with her own early teaching history. She said,

The real turning point for me was [when] I was pregnant with my first child, and my below-level English class—they did tracking in this school: above-level, on-level, and below-level. The below-level English class was filled with children who spoke English as a second language. They were bilingual. They knew one more language than I knew, and they were seen as inferior in the eyes of the school. They threw me a surprise baby shower . . . One little girl had made me—I opened up this gift, a beautiful afghan, and she told me she had made the middle square and her grandma made the rest.

The emotion Beth showed as she told this story was genuine and moving. She continued, There was another gift there that she wanted me to open up, and she was very excited about it. I opened it up and it was a well-used baby sleeper. I wanted to highlight the crocheted blanket. You know, I didn’t want to embarrass her. She said, “Oh, Miss [Beth]. I thought your baby would like this because I wore it when I was a baby.”
For Beth the reality that her students saw her as being more humane than she was beginning to see herself helped her decide to leave the school. She said, “That’s when I thought, “I got to get out,” because they’re way more humane than I am. I really felt like teaching was taking something from me, you know, having me become somebody I didn’t want to become.”

*The Roundtables*

Beth credits her move to rural Appalachian Ohio and more specifically her participation in the Friday Roundtables as helping to save her teaching career. The sincerity on her face indicated that this sentiment was not being overstated. She said, When I moved here [to rural Appalachian Ohio] and I started taking classes, and I was reading Miles Horton and I was reading Paulo Freire, I was like, “Yes, this I could do. This kind of education I could do.” Meeting the group of teachers that eventually started the Institute for Democracy in Education [the Friday Roundtables]; I actually credit that group with my decision to stay in education. I think I would have left completely if it hadn’t been for them.

Beth’s heartfelt belief that the roundtable group helped her remain in education stands as a testament to the transformational nature of this group.

Beth offered several reasons why she maintains this belief about an event that happened over twenty years ago and shared her story of how the Roundtables helped her rethink her teaching practice. She said,

Well for one thing, they were honest. You know, there was a level of conversation where people were willing to speak the truth about what was going on in schools. They were willing to talk about—they were advocates for children. The children
always came first in those conversations. It wasn’t about, “How do I fulfill this mandate or how do I teach to this test?” although testing was only beginning to sort of get [started] . . . the standardization movement was coming in with “A Nation At Risk” and “First Lessons,” and all those reports coming out from the federal government. The [Roundtable group] talked about kids first. They lived kids first. You know, the stories that came out of their classrooms, there was such a strong desire to educate children to be empowered, to have a say in their world, and a belief that education changes the world. I was so drawn to that because it was so counter the status quo that I had experienced in [my first school].

For Beth the Roundtables were “very life-giving.” She added, “There was passion that was allowed in the room. There was excitement. They met on Friday afternoons at 4:30. You know, who does that?”

Quickly after Beth joined the Roundtables the group helped her become acquainted with a local private elementary school and an open teaching position at that school. Beth shared the story of how these two moments in her life (i.e., her Roundtable membership and her next teaching position) came together. She explained,

I think what happened was I had written a paper for [a local professor who was involved in the Roundtables] and he said, “You might be interested in this group of people that are meeting.” I didn’t know anybody. The two things sort of happened simultaneously. The [Roundtables] happened and at the same time I also met a group of parents that had started [a local] community school, which is no longer in existence. One of the parents approached me and . . . she said, “You know, we’re looking for a new teacher and . . . how you talk about education is
what this school is trying to implement, so I think you’d be a good match.” I got hired right around the same time that I was also attending all the roundtables, so I was in a classroom while I was also in these conversations with teachers.

Beth’s return to the classroom coupled with her Roundtable participation helped her quickly progress as a democratic teacher. The two things she seemed to most appreciate about the Roundtable were the support offered and the discussions about literacy. Beth said that the Roundtable was continually “supporting each other if we ran up against opposition from colleagues or administration or parents, or even sometimes, kids, although that was less likely to happen.”

It was the group’s discussions about literacy and literacy’s impact on education that seemed to be the most exciting to Beth. She shared her story,

I think in those early roundtables, what was really clear was that language, literacy is empowering. I mean we were reading Frank Smith and Maury Clay, and Sylvia Ashton Warner, and thinking, “Yes! This is a group of people who are listening to kids, who are helping kids learn to read the world.” I mean those were great conversations. I still run into kids that I had during that time period, who will tell me what they’re reading . . . Then we had a couple of whole language conferences, which were just unbelievably great. You know, where people were really digging in and talking about what was happening. As a literacy professor—that’s what I teach now is literacy—what I find fascinating to me is that philosophy of whole language has found a way to survive . . . I think for me it’s the notion that hope is in the struggle, and if you’re not struggling, you don’t have hope. Those belief systems, you know, what whole language did was
provide hope. Then, when you saw it in action, it became more than just hope. You know, it was so empowering that people couldn’t turn away from it. So for children, it became a way out or a way into something that they dreamed of, or that they wanted to become or a way that they wanted to be in the world. It was the same for teachers, too. If I embrace this, it means I can bring myself to the classroom, you know? I can be here. I’m not a technician, right? I’m not just a deliverer of somebody else’s information, but this is the art and the craft of teaching.

Beth’s passion for literacy education was contagious. It was hard for me to understand how the passionate educator sitting in front of me had ever considered leaving the profession of education.

*Democratic Education Defined*

Beth’s beliefs about democratic education and its definition dovetailed nicely with her understanding of the teaching of literacy. After a momentary pause, she said, Well, I think for me it [democratic education] really is about empowering people to create the kinds of communities that everyone has a voice in, everyone participates in. I know [members of the Roundtables] liked to talk about it as citizenship, and we had a lot of conversations in those days about civic engagement, and about educating for democratic citizenship. I certainly believe in that, but I also think that it goes deeper than what our current understanding of being a good citizen is. For me, it’s being a member of something bigger than that. . . Sally’s phrase was, “I’m as democratic as I can stand to be.” That really worked for me. I think that worked for a lot of us. Yeah, I mean I know I was a
progressive educator. I mean I definitely put myself in that camp I identified with the people that I read about. You know, I liked a lot of what Dewey had to say, but I also liked what George Counts had to say. Vivien Paley’s stuff seemed really democratic to me. The kids in my classroom definitely had a voice. We operated the classroom by consensus. Even when I moved to a public school after [my private school], our classroom meetings were operated by consensus. I mean we modified it a little bit, but every decision we made for the community and the classroom had to have a particular level of agreement to it.

The importance of hearing her student’s voice and acting on their ideas in the classroom was a foundational element in Beth’s definition of democratic education.

**Tension between Democratic and Traditional Teachers**

After earning her degree Beth moved to a new school in a new state. She said, “I moved to a school [in a large northern city].” Beth noted that this school had a history of progressive education. However, her experiences were not always happy. She shared,

Well, that particular school had a history of progressive education . . . There were clashes between progressivism and capitalism, you know? Now what worked in that school for me [was] the principal . . . [He] was a great principal to work with. When I left the school, I began to appreciate how much of a buffer he was between me and parents and other faculty members that didn’t agree with what I was doing.

Beth recalled a painful experience she had at the school that involved her and more traditional teachers in the school. She said,
When I was at that school, there was a letter to the editor written about some of the practices in my classroom. It didn’t name me, but everybody knew . . . Well, the letter highlighted that the children in my class— we made decisions about how we wanted to be together. For second and third graders, those decisions were things like, “Can we wear hats in the classroom? Can we chew gum in the classroom? Is it okay to call you by your first name?” as well as other decisions like boys or girls getting left out of games on the playground and how do we address that. There were things that on the surface seemed kind of superficial, except that they are important to eight-year-olds, so I was respectful of that. Then there were issues that went deeper, you know, that really had to do with ways that we want to be in the world with one another, and ‘is it fair that girls don’t get to play in soccer on the playground because the boys say they can’t?’ which was the particular issue in our classroom. That led us to all kinds of studies about—the kids actually made great parallels between how blacks were kept out of professional athletics and how women were being kept out of professional athletics. They were making all kinds of parallels to that.

Beth stopped for a moment and then continued her story. She noted,

What did people take issue with? I mean what got cited in the paper was actually kids calling me by my first name, which wasn’t entirely accurate. Kids had the choice. I never said they had to call me by my first name. The other thing was hats, because there was this belief that taking off a hat is a sign of respect.

As she talked about this instance and her positioning the issues of concern as trivial nature did not seem to ease the harm that the letter caused her as a democratic teacher.
Beth continued her story noting the response of several parents to her work with their students. She said,

Now the great irony was, in this particular community, many of the parents were CEOs. I mean we’re talking it’s a wealthy community, so we’re talking people who hold prestigious positions in well known companies. They were mostly the dads in the group. When they came to the first curriculum night, where I laid out, “Here’s what we do on an average day in the classroom,” and I talked about our classroom meeting times, and the democratic ways in which we were making decisions together. That group of people came to me and said, “This is what we long for in our workplace that we can’t get.” I had a lot of support from that group of people, but a lot of tension with other teachers in the building because I didn’t necessarily want to do things the way that they had always been done.

For Beth the tension that existed between her and some of the other teachers centered on “how things” had always been done in the school. She said, “You know, there were curricular traditions, for example. We had to study pioneers. I’m like, “Pioneers? Great. We can study civil rights pioneers.” We can study—You know, I’d throw it out to the kids.” Beth noted that she had to study “covered wagon pioneers.” She shared,

[We had to study] Westward expansion, you know? Those would emerge as real tensions with teachers, who would say, “This isn’t the curriculum you’re supposed to be teaching.” Those were much harder to navigate around. Although, I worked with wonderful people, you know? The curriculum would come from the kids, from me, and yes, I had a curriculum guide, but the principal—that I told
you was so great—actually didn’t hand me the curriculum guide until the end of my first year of teaching.

Beth smiled when she said the curriculum could come from the children. Beth finished this story with another story about a girl in her class, a tape recorder, the school’s curriculum and the content of Africa. She said,

At one point, one little girl came in with a tape recorder that she had interviewed—because we’d been talking about interviews—she had interviewed her cousin, who was an ABC correspondent in Somalia. . . . This was in 1993 . . . We listened to the tape, and the kids wanted to know everything they could know about Africa. Well, Africa is in the fifth grade curriculum [and I was in the fourth grade], so I had to go to the fifth grade teacher, but the fifth grade teacher was great. She said, “Yeah, wonderful. If they study this at this age, then when I get them I’ll be able to go this deeper,” you know, but not everybody felt that way.

It’s interesting where we draw lines in schools.

For me the double meaning in Beth’s comment meant that schools are sometimes more interested in the rules of the institution than the interests of its students.

*What It Means To Call Yourself a Democratic or Progressive Teacher*

Beth talked about the implications for teachers who identify themselves as democratic or progressive. She said,

There’s something about saying I’m a progressive educator or I’m a democratic educator that people equate with that it’s a free-for-all . . . We got a lot of that in the early days, that this was touchy-feely stuff, that it was fluff, that it was
anarchy. “You’re going to have anarchy in your classroom if you have kids making decisions.”

In Beth’s current work as a professor of education the implications of defining herself as a democratic or progressive educator includes a more thorough critique or a magnified explication of the above comments. She noted that some of her colleagues argue that, “All we need to do is help our students figure out how to teach to the test, because that’s what’s going to make them successful as teachers.” There is foundationally a difference in their orientation to teaching; a different belief system, a different value system. You know, I think that comes out of various places for different people. I mean, you know, I could easily have been in that camp, except for the circumstances that I found myself in and surrounded by people [The Roundtable group] that were saying,” It’s okay to question.”

Beth added, during “those first two years of teaching, I was running a tight ship. You know, I bought into a lot of that stuff. It just didn’t feel good. I was hailed as a good teacher, and I wasn’t teaching.”

*Administrators Matter*

Beth understands the important role an administrator plays in determining the philosophical direction of the school. In her experiences the simple loss of a supportive administrator can have dramatic outcomes related to how a school approaches the work of educating students. She shared the following story,

I taught in a school [in a large northern city] and it started out great. It was a new school . . .you know, we were on the ground floor of creating it. We had a great principal. Then principal got fired, and then it shut down [the democratic school].
It became a public parochial school because that was the funder’s orientation. So I know that firsthand. I mean what happened in that case, and I know of several other cases, is that those of us that were working toward it left because we couldn’t make it happen . . . It’s such a dilemma, you know, because I still have that group of children’s faces in my head, you know? So who gets hurt the most? You know, I get the privilege of walking away—but the kids don’t get to walk away.

Beth paused as she remembered not only the school that might have been but also the faces of students who would have found themselves in a democratically focused school. She continued her story and offered a practical solution to the dilemma of administrator power. She said,

So, I mean what’s the answer to that? I think we need way more of an emphasis on democratic leadership . . . [So] you get an administrator who believes in democracy and says, “Okay, we’re going to make these decisions together, we’re going to figure this out together,” everybody has a voice here. We’re really going to study; we’re going to put thought into this. We’re not going to be driven by test scores, or we’re not going to be driven by whatever from the outside pressing in.

For Beth the leadership of the school’s administrator is a key component of having a democratic educational experience for students.

_Appalanchia_

In relation to her work in rural Appalachian Ohio Beth noted that “poverty breeds difficulties.” She added,
There’s harshness there. There’s a lack of opportunity that’s the same in many ways if you’re in an inner-city or if you’re in a rural area. The lack of opportunity, having to work twice as hard to prove that you are not this stereotype that somebody wants to make you into being. The classism is huge, and it’s connected to all the other “isms.” I mean they’re all interconnected.

The harshness Beth talked about seemed to visibly affect her. She slumped a little bit and then straightened in her chair as she discussed the stretch she found in her fellow teachers’ views of the children from Appalachia. Beth returned to her Roundtable days and shared her understanding of what her friends and fellow Roundtable partners understood the children of Appalachia. This recollection seemed to be a source of strength for Beth. She said,

My impression of kids in this area, when I was working here, was—you know, I had Sally. You know, I had Sally, who saw beauty in every child, who saw a strength in every child, and she was an incredible mentor to me . . . I worked with good people. You know, I worked with people who didn’t give in to the dominant way of looking at the world, and that that was significant in keeping me in teaching from a positive place . . . So the kids reflected it back, you know? When you work with a teacher who believes in you that’s what you send back, you know? That’s what you show the teacher, is what they see.

Sally and the other Roundtable teachers helped Beth find the beauty in the children she worked with despite the harshness of their situations. Helping Beth to show her best teacher side to her students was another beautiful gift offered by the Roundtable and its teachers.
What I Most Value About Myself as a Democratic Teacher

As Beth thought about what it is that she most values about her work as a democratic teacher she seemed unsure about how to respond saying, “there’s a question I don’t entertain.” She quickly recovered and shared her thoughts about her work. She said,

I guess I value that I’m not going to give it up, that there are people out there that have it a lot harder. I sit in privilege. I am not immune to that, and I better do something good with it. Because I didn’t do anything to deserve some of the things I have. It is birthright, you know? So I better do something worthwhile with that. That’s probably what keeps me going more than anything else.

Beth paused for a moment as she filled with emotion. She said, “God, you’re going to make me cry. I don’t think about that positive stuff I do. . You know—when you are in the middle of the work, you don’t think about it.”

Beth continued her comments with a sincere and thankful nod to the Roundtables. She said,

I mean the reason the question is hard is because I just feel – you know, I feel lucky. I feel blessed. You know, whatever word you want to attach to it. That group of largely women, although Thomas was hugely influential, the group was largely [made up of] women and that group of women saved me. I mean they saved me. I would not be who I am today. I would not still be in education. I would not have made some of the personal choices I’ve made in my life if it had not been for that group of women.
I could not help but comment on the power of her words. I noted, “It was that kind of an experience, and that’s a pretty special thing to have been involved in.” Beth quickly added,

Well, there’s no turning back because you have – I mean just as you say that, I get chills, because it’s so true. It wasn’t just about me. It was about this group, and how we wanted this group to be, and how that radiated out to children. If I didn’t do my part, it was like, you know, what’s that going to do to the community if I don’t do my part here? . . . I mean it was – and we did. We stood up for each other. You know, when petitions got circulated, we at the very least were able to say, “They’re off base. They don’t see you.” And then, “So what are we going to do about it? How are we going to fight it?” You know? Because of the [group], I’ve been to board meetings where 300 people showed up. You know what I mean? Yeah, and it was so much bigger than any one of us. I don’t feel like I did anything special in this group, other than being willing to be part of it, you know?

Ultimately, Beth’s humility was the thing I admired most about her work and her story.
Erin

*Introduction*

As an elementary school teacher Erin started her career in the democratic embrace of the Friday Roundtable group. While she was not a founding member of the group, she was an early member of the Roundtable. Erin worked as a pre-service teacher with one of the Roundtable members and came to the Roundtable after she entered the profession as a licensed teacher. Erin has been in the classroom for over sixteen years and for fifteen of them, worked in rural Appalachian Ohio. Currently, Erin is working in a fifth grade classroom in a suburban elementary school in Ohio as a language arts teacher. Several themes emerged from our conversation, including: a discussion of Erin’s teaching history, her participation in the Friday Roundtables, her work as a self defined democratic teacher, her many years working in rural Appalachian Ohio, what she values about her work as a democratic teacher and her hopes for democratic educational practices.

*Teaching History*

Erin grew up in a suburb of a large northern Ohio City. Her father was a teacher and Erin noted that her mother demanded that her children work in schools. Of her mother, Erin shared, “She used to say that she paid the highest taxes in the state of Ohio so she expected us to get a good education. And so, it was always something that was very important to my family.”

As Erin entered college she was not sure if she wanted to become a teacher. Her first choice was “environmental geography.” As she remembered this time in her life Erin said,
I came to [a large college in rural Ohio] and I wasn’t sure if I was going to major in Education—I was admitted in the College of Education. I just wasn’t sure if that’s what I wanted. I thought about doing environmental geography and then everyone kept saying, “Well stick with teaching. You’ll always have a job.” So, I got my undergrad in elementary education at the time of the 1-8 certificate. And that was, I finished—let’s see, I did four-and-a-half years of college, so I graduated in 1991.

Erin decided to teach in rural Appalachian Ohio. Regarding her decision to stay in the Appalachian region as a teacher she said,

I loved this area, loved the Appalachian climate and just the ruralness, and decided to stay. Luckily, I got a job teaching sixth grade at [a rural elementary school]. I was in that building for five years. [When] they built a new middle school . . . . I moved [with] the sixth grades up to the new middle school, so I was at that building then for ten years. I just had my first year, this year, at [my current school] teaching fifth grade.

Erin’s current classroom is in a more affluent school than her previous schools.

*Friday Roundtables*

For the first fifteen years of her career Erin worked directly in the same school as several of the original Roundtable teachers. She shared the story of how she came to be part of the group. She said,

I was befriended by these people [the Roundtable teachers] and then I got to be a part of that whole group with them. So, that’s how I got into the meetings. And so those Friday night meetings were just wonderful because just the conversations
that happened and the focus on what classrooms could be and should be was you know . . . for me it just filled that void that I had that I thought that this is what I should be doing but I didn’t really know of anybody doing these things.

By linking her Roundtable experiences together with her school experiences she continued,

And at that time too, [my first school] was a really progressive school when I was hired there. I felt really privileged to be able to work there. And that was when venture capital grants had been given out by the state and [our school] was a venture capital school. And they were just in the process of reconfiguring the school into what were called families. So there were three different families that went from K-6, and they were looking at non-graded classrooms and looping, and doing all sorts of nontraditional things in the school. So, that also was nice to be in an environment where they weren’t the traditional, typical style of learning.

Erin enjoyed her work as a new teacher. As she began to understand democratic education the support of her Roundtable colleagues was an important part of her early development as a democratic teacher. Erin thinks that she was fortunate to have worked with the Roundtable teachers. She said, “Luckily I fell into the right hands with friends and teachers that kind of a guided me through our discussions that things [in my classroom] could happen in a democratic way.”

*I am Democratic*

When I asked Erin if she was considered herself a democratic teacher, an interesting answer emerged. She said, “Yes, but I think your question’s interesting because I feel like I’ve become and become less and less of a democratic teacher over the
years.” In an interesting twist, Erin had noted that the ability to be democratic in her classroom was more challenging at this point in her career than it was sixteen years ago.

Democratic Education Defined

As Erin talked about her self-identification as a democratic teacher she offered an understanding of what this pronouncement means to her. She shared,

For me . . . a democratic teacher is someone that listens to the kids, and allows them to have input in what happens in the classroom from the little things to the big things. It doesn’t mean that they rule the classroom by any means. I think a lot of people think democratic means chaos, but I think the most important fundamental behind it is letting the kids realize that they have say and that their voice should be heard.

Erin paused and added continued her story adding examples of how this happens in her classroom. She said,

[For example] I think it is as simple as having a class meeting where the kids can put things on an agenda they want to talk about. But even with that, then the struggle is to allow them to realize that they should have control in how problems are solved. That it shouldn’t just be, “Well here’s our problem, you take care of it,” but instead turning it back to them with coming up with solutions and ideas.

Erin seemed to relish the idea of involving her students in the administration of their shared classroom.
Erin quickly turned the story in the direction of academics. She offered her understanding of how democratic education can enhance the educational experiences of her students. She shared,

And then I think as far as schoolwork goes, trying to make it more meaningful for them, and again, letting them have some say in what their interests are. I mean I like even like today, a simple example, we’ve got the achievement tests coming up in two weeks. And so, we are going through some practice materials for those. And we’re reading one of the stories today, which is a really boring story about Mars. And I explained to them it’s not the adult’s job to make it interesting to them. They’ve got to assume some responsibility to keep their attention going, and to use some different methods to be a part of the story versus zoning out while they’re reading it. And just like so that they have more ownership with their learning. That it’s not just sit back and let the teacher dictate and they just absorb what they can or will.

Erin’s attempt to help her students develop a sense ownership for their learning, especially inside the space of their preparation for the high-stakes testing looming in the distance, speaks well of her desire to remain democratic.

In addition Erin noted that the little things in her classroom provided her with the opportunity to practice democratic education. She said,

And I think little things like that are democratic. Instead of me saying, “Okay, here’s your ten, you know your five vocabulary words, look them up,” they’re in charge of finding words that they don’t know or words that they’re not familiar with or they don’t use in their own everyday language, and then looking those up
and teaching them to their group. And it requires more independence on their part.
Whereas some of these kids just want to do it the lazier way of saying, “Well
can’t you just give me the words?” And my point is, “No, your words are
different than what his words would be and so on.” You know so little things like
that that they’re not—they’re used to being able to be like the robot almost, you
know, that you just feed it to them and they absorb it. They don’t have to process
it.

Erin’s democratic philosophy includes helping her students value their participation in
the educational process.

_Democratic Classroom Management_

As she talked about her democratic educational practice, Erin turned her thoughts
to the way she manages her classroom. She shared,

I don't rule with an iron fist. You know it’s like I allow talking to go on. I allow
the kids to get up and go to the bathroom if they need to go. If they need a drink,
they can get it. I’m not real strict about raising hands when we talk. It took them a
little while in the beginning to learn how to wait their turn, because they were
used to only doing hands. So I think it is the little things like that. I’m real frank
with the kids and just I tell them it’s—I think that’s one of the reasons why I like
an upper grade level versus little kids because I tell them how—you know a lot of
it’s based on respect. As much respect as you can show me for one another, that’s
how much you’ll get in return. And every teacher down here does the system of
writing the name on the board and putting the check next to it, and I’ve never in
my life put a name on a board and I never will. I don’t feel like they should be
singled out that way. I think the kids are smart. They know. For me to say, “Okay,
Enough is enough,” they realize, okay, I’ve reached my point as compared to
another teacher that would write a name on the board.

Erin seemed confident with her classroom management style, inside the space of her
classroom; however, she did not seem as confident in her style outside of her classroom
space. Erin is currently in her first year in a new school. A school that is much more
traditional than her old school. Regarding the rest of the school in relation to classroom
management she said,

Part of it is the middle school mentality in me but it is not natural. You know
when are we, as adults, expected to stand single-file and absolutely silent? So, I
always tell the kids, “You can talk quietly but if it gets loud so it’s disrupting the
other class then that’s not okay.” But you can tell a class that’s left my room
versus the other two because mine will be talking quietly and the other ones will
be standing there silently.

For Erin the difference in her educational approach is starker than just how her students
move through the schools hallways.

**Traditional Schools**

Erin’s many years in a school filled with several like-minded democratic teachers
did not fully prepare her for life in a school that is openly more autocratic or traditional.
For Erin, this transition is not moving forward as smoothly as she had hoped. Regarding
her new and distinctly more traditional school, it is the school’s fanatical reliance on testing that is the most unsettling. She shared,

I think testing-wise there’s a lot of pressure, and that’s what’s interesting about coming to this school. I mean I went strictly stereotypically with the districts; I went from the poor, rural district that’s falling apart, no money, because we you know, cutting teachers, cutting classes, cutting subjects, but it did support freedom of teachers to teach they felt was best. And with [with my old district], we never did really well on the tests, and that wasn’t something that freaked everybody out and it was used against us . . . [At my old school] we said, “let’s still make this meaningful for the kids. We’ll do our best with the test but we’re not going to let the test rule the school.

In Erin’s new school the high stakes standardized test “runs” the school and its educational philosophy. She continued,

And then once I chose to leave them, I ended up getting the job here at [my new school] and stereotypically, it is the elitist school that relies solely on tests. They’re test-driven. Everything here is to get the highest test scores. People teach strictly out of the textbook. It’s very Basal textbook oriented, right down to the kids. For example, when I gave them a choice to sit where they want to sit in fifth grade they look at me like I’d just asked them to change to a purple person or something. I mean [they are] not used to having any choices because it was all textbook test, this how it is, period.

For Erin this is not what her teaching experience tells her is best for children at the fifth grade level. She seemed especially unhappy with the way the school’s test drive
philosophy was affecting her students and their view of learning. Regrettably, Erin acknowledged that if tests are seen as the most important part of school then her school’s structure is fulfilling its mission. With a sadness that concerned me, she said,

And I think in a way that has helped with their, you know, with test scores, because if you’re just teaching to a test, of course you’re going to be able to do a little bit better on it. But in the process of that, I think the whole idea of democratic teaching is totally lost. So I guess it just depends on how much or how much pressure or how much a school emphasizes succeeding on these tests.

Erin quickly added,

And I believe you can do well on the tests teaching democratically, but I mean I think it depends on what the kids come with from their past also. It’s not that you have to teach to a test, but when you’re looking at the kids from my rural Appalachia like at [my old school] that came with less, that needed more information, school wasn’t a priority for a lot of them. And then of course not even trying to do your best on a test was a priority, but that made it harder.

Whereas here, the kids are test-driven, they’ve been trained since kindergarten to test and do well on tests. And they test every subject, every grade level, even if it’s not part of the achievement tests.

Erin noted that it “is hard. It’s really, really, really, really hard.” To be democratic in a school like the one she is now teaching. A school that only values its students’ test scores.
Test Scores

As Erin shared her experiences regarding her current work in a school that heavily values its standardized test scores as the measure of success she said, “You know, the testing has me start to contemplate how much longer I want to stay in education.” Erin was visibly unhappy with her current situation and her desire to be a teacher was waning. She offered some insights into the specifics of why she was struggling. Primary among these was a school mandated pretest as a practice conducted two weeks prior to the state mandate standardized test. She said,

Each quarter they’re supposed to go up [my student’s test scores]. And I know that they did go up a little bit from the first to second. I haven’t gotten to the third one. We were—like my questions why are we doing this, two weeks before we have the actual achievement test?—because it’s a long process for the kids to go through the state mandated test. And then the answer back was, “Well so that way you can make any modifications and teach anything two weeks before the achievement test.” Which again, is fundamentally so against what I believe in. It’s like, “Why am I going to try to take two weeks to cram more information [into my students] just for this test if we’re in the middle of reading this wonderful novel and learning that way?” I think luckily I’ve had the experience [of teaching this way] so I’ve just learned to keep my mouth shut with a lot of this. I did throw that question out in a [faculty meeting] and I had people look at me like, “You’re not supposed to say that out loud.”
Regarding teacher accountability for their classes test score and the scores improvement each year Erin said, “I didn’t get it [a number] this year because it was my first year here, but it sent people home crying because their number was lower than expected.”

For Erin it is her school testing culture and its effects on how teachers see their students that is most disturbing to her democratic teaching sensibilities. She said,

And that was right when proficiency tests actually started, was like right at the beginning of my career. And even then, it wasn’t just, “Let’s see improvement.” It was “let’s try to do our best.” But it wasn’t a do or die situation. Whereas here [at my current school], I mean the first thing I heard when I started here was the fact that we only beat [a rival elementary school] with test scores by a couple of points. And we can’t let it get that close again. And on the front bulletin board [is a sign that reads], “Rated excellent by ODE” [Ohio Department of Education].

Erin shook her head in disbelief at the notion that this school was valued by the state as “Excellent.”

**Non-Doers**

As Erin talked about “excellent” she started to share her thinking about what her school calls the “non-doers.” These are the kids who do not do well in the highly competitive, highly test-driven environment of Erin’s excellently rated school. She said that these students, the “non-doers” just “give up.” She shared her understanding of the experiences of the ‘non-doers” at her school. She said,
Yeah. And there’s a discrepancy with money, you know you won’t see kids that come from an affluent background being the non-doers. It’s going to be—like we’ve got a couple kids, that come in from [a rural area] and other areas, which struggle. And I feel for them. I feel really bad, especially coming from a school where that was the norm for . . . most of the kids just didn’t have that support. And here, they stand out. They have a lot of stuff taken away from them. A lot of teachers make them stay in every lunch to work . . . there’s a couple kids that haven’t been outside to recess for months because they’re forced to stay in and work every time. You know . . . they’ve already failed this much . . . that goes back to that whole schools philosophy of success . . . I said to the one little boy today who was in here. I was like, “How do we work it so you can go out every Friday, if you, you know.” He’s like, “Ah, at this point…I don’t even care about going outside. I don’t play anymore.” It’s like he’s just given up. I think they lose hope. And they see it’s competitive and it is very competitive. [Also,] the kids don’t see it as much as I do, but it is very cliquey based on money and success.

I fully understood the weight of her dilemma as she contemplates how much longer to stay in education.

*Appalachia*

Erin had previously worked in rural Appalachian Ohio for fifteen years. As we talked about teaching in the Appalachian context, Erin shared her experiences as a community outsider. She said,

When I started teaching at [my first school] I was a huge outsider. Here I am, only a 22-year-old that doesn’t have anything really to—you know, from the outside to
bring in. But I was from the big city, what was I doing teaching there. You know it took a long [time] probably four years before I was accepted. So I think there’s a trust issue in the beginning when you’re working in Appalachia. There was another family [with my last name] and . . . you know first question was always, “How are you related to the [the other family]?” I’m like, “I’m not related to [them].” It was just the whole—and I remember—I can remember very vividly, my first round of conferences. And it was like an interview of me, every conference, at the beginning. And once we got past that, then we could talk about the child.

Erin seemed at ease talking about her work in rural Appalachian Ohio. She was more comfortable as she continues her story.

The strength of community in her Appalachian experience was another interesting point Erin discussed. She said, “One of the positive things was that because community was so strong, parents really tried to support the school as much as they could . . . they really wanted to see their kids succeed…”

What I Value About Myself as a Democratic Teacher

Erin paused briefly before offering her thoughts on what she most valued about herself as a democratic teacher. After a moment she noted with some emotion, “Academically, I think I’ve really been able to see the impact I have with literature, this year especially with kids that aren’t used to having books being a part of their learning [like at my current school].” This was especially revealing because when Erin started her new job at her current school a veteran teacher, a fellow language arts teacher, offered her some sobering advice. Erin shared this experience saying,
The teacher that I was supposed to teach with this year, who’s been here for a while, who’s very traditional, I mean very traditional . . . So if you look around I’ve got a huge classroom library. It is really important to me to encourage the kids to read. And she basically said to me, when I was asking about bookshelves when I moved in, she said, “Don’t bring your books. You don’t need a library. You will only use the textbook.”

Erin noted that this statement “crushed me.” As her long year in this school nears its end she said “A lot of these kids have not read a book as a class or on their own. It’s only been the textbooks or the computer, like SRI programs that they would read and do the tests on.” Erin did have her students read a novel as a class this year, even if it was after the testing was finished.

Erin also values her willingness to hear her students’ voices. For her this is an important part of being a democratic teacher. She explained,

I think that and then I think this whole idea of openness with respect. I don’t feel like that just because they’re kids they don’t need to know certain things or they should be treated differently. And I feel like kids feel as though they can come to me, whether it’s something good or bad, and that I’ll listen to them. That they will have a voice here, that their voice is represented.

Listening to students is an important part of her work as a democratic teacher.

*My Hope for Democratic Educational Practice*

Erin’s hope for democratic educational practice was rooted in her desire to have the everyday in schools, what she calls “natural learning experiences” be part of the
students’ learning process. Erin told the following story that illustrated this concept. She shared,

I would hope to give the kids more choices throughout their day. Like, we’ve got a really good student council here. It is a real powerful student council, but I don’t see them doing anything but fundraising. The money all goes to the big PTO pot that spends money on school stuff. I mean the PTO spends a lot of money.

Like all three sixth grade classrooms next year, well two of the rooms now and then with me going up, we’ll all have SMART boards, laptops, and LCD screens. Erin paused and then continued,

And the way the student council is structured it’s very, very formal. I mean from the nominating process to elections, which I think would be a great way to represent a democratic society but it does not work this way. You know like when we have our class meetings, our student council rep, I tell him it’s his job to take notes. So, when he goes to a student council meeting, you know the process should be they talk about issues that we have. Anything we can’t handle in our room, they should take on as a student council.

Erin continued her story offering the following example to support her assertions about student council. She shared,

It was like a simple example was the kids were complaining, I guess this has been going for years, like 15 years, that their kick balls, when they play ball outside, they land on the fence and it pops them because it’s got little spikes. So they’ve wanted to get those tubing, the tubing that can go across fences. And just learning about this from the kids, this has been [going on] forever. And during our class
meeting, they would always bring this up. I was like, “All right, you guys. I can’t
deal with this. What can happen?” And they’re like, “All right, we’ll take it to
student council,” they know to do that . . . [One student asked] “Well will student
council do anything?” And our [class representative] said, “No.” And I’m like,
“All right, then what can you guys do?” So I started questioning them with that,
they decided, you know it was my whole homeroom, like the six kids that were
interested, went out and measured how much fence there was, they got online to
look up how much the tubing was. You know to get a price so that they could
actually go and say to council, “Okay, we would need this money to do this.
Could we do it?” And then they discovered that it was lot of money and they
didn’t pop nearly as many balls to validate trying to pay for that stuff. But you
know . . . it was one of those natural learning experiences. Whereas I don’t think
any other teacher would have tried . . . I think when the kids would’ve said, “Our
balls are popping,” it would’ve been, “Okay. So what? Deal with it,” you know
whatever. Whereas here, we were able to take it, and they came up with what they
thought was a solution that ended up not being able to work.

Many children need to have the opportunity to be in a classroom like Erin’s, even if she
can only offer them small rays of democratic education instead of its more fulfilling
completeness.
CHAPTER FIVE: THE ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Introduction

This research study is a multiple Case Study conducted as a Narrative Inquiry from an Appreciative Inquiry position. In the previous chapter, I presented a detailed case for each of the eleven teacher participants. These individual case narratives constitute the data collected in this research study as it answers the following research questions (RQ):

How and why these self identified democratic educators:

RQ1. Maintain their commitment to democratic pedagogical practice in the face of political policies that call for the reduction of democracy in the classroom through centralized, standardized and predetermined outcome measures, and

RQ2. Understand and define democratic education in their teaching practice in an underserved, under resourced and underrepresented population of students and families (generally working class and/or rural working poor people in Appalachian Ohio).

In other words, this study seeks to understand the following: "What can we more fully understand and appreciate about the experiences of democratic teachers working in rural Appalachian Ohio?"

The individual, one-on-one, recorded interviews conducted with the eleven participants lasted between fifty-five minutes and one hour and twenty minutes. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. The verbatim transcripts were audibly inspected and initially coded using a “line by line” process described by Lofland, Snow, Anderson & Lofland (2006). Specifically these authors state,
Initial coding begins by inspecting your interview transcriptions . . . line by line and asking of each discrete item and/or chunk of information—be it an event, behavior or place—such general opened questions as follows:

- What is this? What does it represent (Struass and Corbin 1990, p. 63)?
- What is this an example of (Cuba, 1998, p. 35)?
- What is going on? What are people doing? What do these actions and events take for granted? How do the structure and context serve to support, maintain, impede, or change these actions and statements (Charmaz 2001, p. 142)?

These authors add, “One of the characteristic features of initial coding is that the codes are generally quite numerous and varied (p. 201).”

After completing the “initial coding” I then re-coded each transcription in a more focused manner, or as Lofland, Snow, Anderson & Lofland (2006) describe it, I conducted a “focused coding” (p. 201). For me the second more “focused coding” allowed for the development of larger codes or themes. Once I completed the entire coding process I then utilized a free and open source Qualitative Data Analysis program entitled “Weft QDA” to facilitate the organization and management of the data.

Common Themes

Ultimately, among the eleven individual cases eight common themes emerged. These eleven common themes share a degree of overlap because they are all associated with the intense experiences these teachers shared as members of the Friday Roundtables. In addition, the complexity of democratic pedagogy, democratic teaching and the human relations shared by the teachers in this study contribute to the overlap of ideas, principles
and actions all of which are reflected in the common themes. The eight common themes are: Teaching History, Democratic Education, The Roundtables, Self-Values, Appalachia, The Test, Enhancing Democratic Education and Educators. I understand that overlap may exist among the common themes however; they emerged from the individual narratives and provide nuance to the data found in this narrative study.

Because the eight common themes were fully explicated in the individual cases I will not review each theme in detail. However, several of these common themes were found in greater frequency than others. For example, the themes “Appalachia” and “Self-Values” were common among ten of the eleven participants. In addition, the themes “Roundtables” and “Democratic Education” were common among nine interviewees. Also, the theme “Enhancing Democratic Education” and “Educators,” which includes both teachers and administrators, were common among four participants. The following table (Table 1) shows the distribution of this study’s common individual themes. The numbers at the top of each common theme category serves as a reference to the themes as presented later in the chapter. For a complete listing of all themes found among the individual cases see appendixes F and G.

**Cross-Case Analysis**

This study now turns its attention to the analysis of the individual cases as a collective case. To accomplish this larger analysis I utilized the most common of the individual case themes to conduct a cross case thematic based analysis. After the cross case themes were placed into a single document three larger observations or “recurring regularities in the data” emerged (Patton, 2003. p. 465). I am calling these recurring regularities “Guided Observations” because as a researcher I was guided by multiple
Table 1

*Table of the Common Themes Across the Individual Cases*

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factors including my understanding of the research literature, my interviewing of the participants, my coding of the individual transcriptions and my identification of the common themes across the individual case data. As a result the following section includes the three “Guided Observations” and a fourth section I have named “Uncommon Utterances” which I will explicate later in this chapter.

Guided Observations and “Uncommon Utterances”

*Guided Observations*

I used the common individual case themes (See Table 1) as categories or codes for the cross-case analysis. Patton (2002) called this, as I noted in chapter three, "nesting" (p. 447). He states, “The analysis would begin with the individual case studies; then the cross-case pattern analysis of the individual cases might be part of the data for the program study” (p.447). As suggested by Patton (2002), I “nested” the individual common case themes into a single cross case document. I then re-coded this larger cross case document in light of the study’s research questions using three “guided observations” as an organizing structure based on the patterns or *recurring regularities that emerged*. Patton (2002) argues that “Without classification there is chaos and confusion. Content analysis, then, involves identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling the primary patterns in the data” (p. 463). For me the “Guided Observations” bring a focus to the analysis of the data by labeling the common patterns in the cross case data which helps to move the analysis forward. The three Guided Observations are:

1. The teachers "steadfast belief in democracy and its application to education."
2. "A deep respect for Appalachia with a pragmatic understanding of its significance."
3. "Resistance to undemocratic educational practices."

Included in my discussion of each “Guided Observation” are selected common case themes (see Table 1). These “common case themes” are numbered based on their placement in Table 1. My discussion of these common case themes is not organized as a linear progression, but a more natural movement of the themes based on their interrelated content.

“Uncommon Utterances”

I use the term “uncommon utterances” to represent unique ideas or interesting words that the respondents put forward or “uttered” during the interviews. These “utterances” resonated with me as a researcher because they represented powerful concepts that offered an important dimension to the analysis not represented in the eight common themes. Therefore, I did not want to lose these “utterances” to the analysis by including them inside the larger discussions found among the three “guided observations.” I found, these “utterances” too small to stand alone as a theme, but too important to exclude from individual attention in the analysis. I will discuss these “uncommon utterances” in detail later in the chapter. As this chapter moves forward the two research questions remain the primary force that gives structure to this analysis.

Guided Observation 1: A Steadfast Belief in Democracy and its Application to Education

The organizing idea in this section centers on the teachers’ ability to maintain a steadfast belief in democracy and its application to education. This “guided observation” addresses research questions one and two. Specifically this section looks at how these teachers defined democracy and applied those concepts to their educational practice. In
addition, this “guided observation” helps bring into focus the group’s steadfast belief in the ideas and promises of democracy as applied to education in their schools.

Several of the teachers in this study came to the Roundtable meetings with an existing belief system and educational practice that leaned in the direction of democracy, but they report that they did not yet possess a full understanding of democratic education. Ben’s case helps us to understand this leaning. He said, “I was always interested in sort of student-centered education . . . I don’t think my practice was [democratic]—I had inclinations, but not a very well developed idea on what I was doing.” It was this pre-Roundtable democratic leaning or what James Mursell (1955) called “democracy as an ethical faith” that helped many of these teachers as they developed a deeper understanding of democratic education (p. 14). Specifically, Mursell noted in his discussion on the notion of “democracy as an ethical faith” that,

The very heart of democracy is a conception of duty—a belief that certain ways of dealing with our fellows are eternally right and other ways of dealing with them are eternally wrong. (p.14)

As this analysis moves forward the depth of these teachers’ belief in both democracy and democratic education emerges as the “grounding” or “foundation” of what they did and how they conducted themselves as teachers, often working in undemocratic schools.

Most of these democratic teachers developed a democratic world view that went beyond their school life. It is this type of democratic understanding that Dewey (1938) demanded must be developed if democracy is to be “become part of the bone and blood of people in daily conduct” as they applied “democratic methods in all social relationships” (p. 720). Linda’s words add support to my analysis. She said,
I think that this group even more so than my education helped me sort out my lifetime values. It carries over into relationships with my husband, with my family, with my friends. Because democracy extends past education it is how you feel about people.

The strength and conviction most of these teachers hold regarding the primary tenants of democracy and democratic education must be fully appreciated because it is the primary foundation of their educational work and their daily actions. As a result of their convictions and faith in democracy their democratic ethos seeps into the fiber of these pages and provides a constant democratic hue to this analysis.

*Common Theme 2: Democratic Education Defined*

It is not my intent to critique these teachers’ understandings of democratic education. It is my intent that the literature helps to inform and explicate their stories and that their stories help to inform the literature and advance our theoretical understandings. Most of the teachers in this study offered similar views to one another on democratic education. A common theme woven into their definitions was a desire on their part as teachers to give their students voice in the educational process. Several examples illustrate this point. Ben said, “I think it means that students have some ownership of what they are learning.” Sally continues this theme stating, “The kids in my classroom definitely had a voice.” I think Thomas’s words offer the best summation of this idea and offers a glimpse into what having a voice in the classroom must look like. He said, “It’s just the fact that people have . . . a right to have some control over their own destiny, to live in a society where things aren’t dictated to them, but to the degree that is reasonable and possible, that they can participate.”
The work of John Dewey is alive in the words of these teachers. Dewey (1938) argued that a child’s experiences, ideas and interests must be part of the educative environment (pp. 38-41). He also noted that teachers “should know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them [students] all they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worthwhile” (p. 40). By giving students voice in the classroom and by understanding the importance of having their educational work not be the “acquisition of isolated skills and techniques by drill” but the “acquisition of them as a means of attaining ends which make direct vital appeal” these teachers helped their rural Appalachian students understand that their ideas, questions and thinking mattered (Dewey, 1938, p. 19).

Myles Horton explains the importance of understanding and responding to his students’ educational desires in a story about a man who wanted Horton to allow him to bring a singular voice to a workshop at the Highlander Folk School. Horton wrote that the young man wanted to come to Highlander during a workshop and talk about a subject that he, the young man, found interesting and exciting. Horton (1998) said this to the young man,

As far as speaking at Highlander, we have a workshop and the people came here for that. It would not be fair for them to talk about what only you are interested in. We’re trying to build a program on what they [the workshop participants] are interested in. (p. 155)

Another common idea shared by these teachers is that democratic education is important in helping to shape democratic citizens.
George Wood (2005) calls high school “democracy’s finishing school” (p. xix). He writes, “High school is where our young people learn the final lesson about what it means to be a member of a community . . . it must link what students learn with how they use what they are learning, it must be equitable as all students become citizens, and it must empower our children to become citizens. (p. xxiii). Wood’s thinking about the democratic preparation of citizens mirrors the Roundtable teachers’. Sally’s thinking about democratic education’s role in the creation of citizens exemplifies the group’s thinking. She said, “Well, I think . . . really it is about empowering people to create the kinds of communities that everyone has a voice in, everyone participates in.” Ben continues this, saying, “The idea is to create concerned citizens.” John Mursell (1955) stresses this point in his work entitled “Principles of Democratic Education” noting that “democracy has always been the living force in America” (p. 50).

The idea of democratic education and its potential to help people develop a lifetime of democratic citizenship are articulated by the Roundtable teachers. To this end, Mursell writes with great urgency, an urgency that is similar to the Roundtable teachers, that democracy in the United States,

Has been used again and again to compel stubborn, selfish, powerful people to forego monopolized privileged. It has been used to right great wrongs. It has given form and content to our national life. As a matter history, democracy has been the only persistent rallying point we have ever had. That is just as true today as it ever was. Here is the reason why American education must accept democracy as its determining focus. Unless it does so, it has no focus at all. (p. 50)
Mursell’s words align well with the words of these teachers as they worked to bring democracy to their classrooms.

Myles Horton (1998) said “education is what happens to the other person, not what comes out of the mouth of the educator” (p. 131). For Horton, Mursell, and the Roundtable teachers the promise of democratic education is partially realized as they help people discover their capacity to make decisions for themselves. Horton said that “if you believe in democracy, which I do, you have to believe that people have the ability to govern themselves. You’ve got to believe in that potential and work as if it were true in the situation” (p. 131). As reported, the teachers in this study remained steadfast as they continue to cling to the promises of democracy.

The Roundtable teachers lived their democratic philosophy inside of schools as they helped students learn to be democratic citizens. In relation to Horton’s “believing in that potential,” Ben shared a similar Roundtable view saying, “To the extent the teachers have the attitudes that kids can do these things, and we are willing to let go enough to let them learn and make mistakes, then the kids can rise to it.” Toni adds a pragmatic addition to this thinking. She said,

And yet, if you think about it in terms of a dynamic relationship between student and teacher, I’m constantly learning things too. And I’m constantly kind of tweaking my methods and my strategies. To me, it’s a challenge of not teaching the material. It’s a challenge of meeting the group of students that I have, where they are, and taking that journey kind of together.
It is the promise democratic education to help develop a democratic citizenry that has
nourished many of the Roundtable teacher’s steadfast belief in democratic educational
practice as they progressed through their long educative walk with democracy.

**Common Theme 4: The Self Values of these Democratic Educators**

As discussed in chapter two this study is an Appreciative Inquiry (AI). As such, I
was specifically interested in what Barrett and Fry (2005) call the “best past” (p. 97).
While explicated in chapter two this concept is worthy of review. Specifically, Barrett
and Fry (2005) note that “through appreciative stories, the positive core of strengths
generated from multiple voices and stories takes on a degree of sacredness—something to
be honored, revered nurtured and protected” (p. 97). These authors continue by stating, “a
common thread in all work with AI is the solicitation of stories about ‘best past’
experiences in relation to the specific strategic topic under inquiry” (p. 99).

In this study I asked the participants the following question, “Without being
modest, what is it that you most value about yourself, your work, and your democratic
teaching?” This question was an attempt to help establish the “best past” as described by
Barrett and Fry. The following section explores the responses of several of the teachers in
this study. It was my intention, through the use of the principles found in Appreciative
Inquiry, to more fully understand how these classroom teachers remained democratic for
decades inside school conditions and structures that might suggest an easier approach.
The democratic teachers in this study had a deep understanding of their personal
strengths. This deep understanding helped to strengthen this study’s findings related to
their teaching convictions.
Regarding the question “What I value about myself?” Ben said, “[What] I value most about myself is that I help kids see what matters, and I try to teach things that matter to students.” Ben clarified his thoughts stating, “that means you teach them about how to get along with others, as well as the content, the material, and that there’s a way to be with kids that honors their dignity.” For Apple and Beane (1995), democratic education includes “faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems” (p. 7). For Ben his faith in his students’ ability to solve their own issues comes from his personal spiritual faith coupled with his belief in democratic education. He said, “I’m also Roman Catholic, so peacemaking is part of how I see as the message of the gospel.”

Jill stated that she most valued her ability to build relationships with students. She stated, “Probably the thing that I put the most time and energy into was connecting, building relationships with each and every student. And I especially—the unlovable kids were the ones that I tried to love the most, and I tried to go beyond the classroom.” Jill continued, “I always tried to find the kids, and in real subtle ways, to support them, make their lives better, and I think that’s probably what I’m most proud of.” Similarly for Apple & Bean (1995) democratic education also includes a “concern for the welfare of others and the common good” (p. 7).

Sally said, “I get democratic education and I get why we are supposed to have it and what it does for a community of loners. [I understand] what it could do for this whole country if we could all become empowered.” The urgency in her words are also found in George Counts’s (1932) work, “Dare the School Build a New Social Order” as he
discussed democracy and its promise “with respect to the moral equality of men” (p. 41). Counts’s words are many; but relevant to this analysis is the following:

A society fashioned in harmony with the American democratic tradition would combat all forces tending to produce social distinctions and classes; repress every form of privilege and economic parasitism; manifest a tender regard for the weak, the ignorant, and the unfortunate; place the heavier and more onerous social burdens on the backs of the strong; glory in every triumph of man in his timeless urge to express himself and to make the world more habitable . . . strive for a genuine equality of opportunity among all races, sects, and occupations; regard as paramount the abiding interests of the great masses of the people; direct the powers of government to the elevation and the refinement of the life of the common man (p. 41).

Sally noted that, “It floors me that smarter people than me don’t get it. And then I think maybe they do get it and they just don’t want it. They don’t want everybody to be smart because they are holding the cards.” Like many of the Roundtable teachers, Sally has worked as a democratic educator for many years trying to “transform” her school into a place where democracy is practiced, valued and understood.

**Common Theme 3: The Roundtable and a Life of Democratic Teaching**

It is difficult to fully convey the emotive nature of the conversations with the teachers in this study as they described the impact their Roundtable experience had on their professional and personal development. Linda’s words offer a good example of the powerful nature of the Roundtable experience. She said, “I think when we started these Friday afternoons it really gave us an opportunity to think. We felt really
professional—that we were talking about teaching. We were talking about education. We were making our job really important.” Tina adds an important dimension to the democratic commitment of the Roundtable teachers. Tina noted that she did not initially move quickly to a democratic orientation just because she attended the Roundtable meetings. Tina’s initial skepticism soon gave way to a deep and lifelong commitment to democratic education. Regarding her movement to democratic education she said, “And maybe I stayed there longer than some of the people that jumped and couldn’t handle it [being democratic].”

The powerful mix of thinking, reflection and action in the area of democratic education on the part of the Roundtable teachers had the effect of helping them maintain a democratic educational position during their many years in the classroom. To more fully facilitate the analysis of these teachers’ narratives I have organized this section of the study into two main areas: Support and Praxis. In addition, their continued development as teachers facilitated by their Roundtable participation is woven into this section. However, before I move to these two areas it is important to bring into focus the “Roundtable” as an important democratic concept and democratic process.

To me, the Friday Roundtables are similar to the working style of the Highlander Folk Center (now the Highlander Education and Research Center) in that the Roundtable teachers participated in a process of thinking and acting in a participatory way. Highlander’s co-founder Myles Horton (1998) said,

I think of an educational workshop as a circle of learners. “Circle” is not an accidental term, for there is no head of the table at Highlander workshops: everybody sits around in a circle . . . participants feel free to share their
experiences. Then they are encouraged to analyze, learn from and build on these experiences. (p. 150)

For Horton working outside of the formal structures of institutions provided a space for the flow of ideas not tied to “officialdom” (p. 146). Specifically, he said, “these people build their strength in representing the people instead of the officialdom of some organization” (p. 146). For me the strength of the Roundtable and its lasting impact on the teachers who participated is closely tied to their grassroots, non-affiliated and non-officially sanctioned efforts to think through and act on their desire to be the best teachers possible. Linda’s case helps to bring the Roundtable teachers’ voices to this idea. She said,

We began to see that it [traditional education] was all content driven. It was all textbook driven. It was not at all interesting to children nor what is it what the kids were ready to learn. And I think that the basis for us coming together was to ask, “How we can make this better for kids?” and “What is it that we can do to get them get the most out of here? We felt like if we instilled a love of learning, if we instilled an interest in education, if we instilled the ability to read and to question, then that would lead them to be lifelong learners.

The Roundtable teachers found strength in a group process for change. A component of “the democratic way of life” described by Apple & Beane (1995, p. 6). As stated earlier, these authors state that democracy must have “faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems” (p. 7). Thomas’ words are powerful regarding this idea. He noted,
We kind of all had ideas leading in the same direction, but we never had the opportunity just to sit down and . . . grow from each others’ experiences and ideas. Also [we] used these meetings as an opportunity to kind of crystallize in our own mind what we were doing, where we were going, how we were going get there. It was extremely powerful.

Horton (1998) said that “Highlander has been a stop in the continuum of defining and trying to solve an important problem, a place to think and plan and share knowledge” (p. 148). This idea is similar to what the Roundtable was for the teachers in this study, a starting point on their long walk with democratic education.

Support

The Roundtable meetings became a support system for these teachers as they did the heavy lifting of thinking, reflecting and acting related to democratic education and values. Jill’s words give life to the groups ideas about support. She said,

I liked the feeling of being part of a group that really had the students’ best interest at heart, and I think all these people were dedicated educators. I felt very young then. I was sort of in awe of all of them, because they were all a few years older than I was. They had lots of experiences, and I was still new and sort of at times didn’t really know what they were talking about. I felt like they [the roundtable teachers] were so, you know, loving and embraced me as being a young teacher. I think they all, you know, mentored me . . . the experience was incredibly positive.
The supportive nature of the Roundtable is also found in the words of Beth who noted that the group offered a level of support from the resistance of those who opposed the work. She said the group was often in the role of “supporting each other if we ran up against opposition from colleagues or administration or parents, or even sometimes, kids, although that was less likely to happen.”

As noted in Ben’s case he clearly valued the supportive nature of the Roundtable. He noted that,

The support of others is real important, especially in the face of opposition from administrators or other teachers, so the idea of networking and support. Then to me, also, the value of publications that are reflective, you know that I’m not the only one out there that thinks the way I do, so I think that’s important.

The supportive element of the Roundtable group helped the group’s members in their desire for action related to the implementation of democratic classroom practices.

Praxis

The teachers in this study engaged in a thinking, reflective and action driven process they called the Friday Roundtables. In many ways this process, the process of thinking, reflecting and acting is more expansive than the simpler act of engaging in the practice of teaching. The Roundtable teachers must be respected as highly prepared thinking professionals and not simply as “technicians” delivering content. From this view the Roundtable process can be more completely understood as an act of praxis. Linda’s narrative helps explain this process. She said,
Once we had talked about an idea we would try it. We would [then] support one another and [we] would talk about [how] other people are looking at us and talking about us at school. We talked a lot about supporting one another so we could carry on. . . We used to say it’s not good and bad it’s right . . . so, we were able to support one another.

For Donald Schon (1983), “a practitioner’s reflection can serve as a corrective to over-learning.” He continues explaining that “through reflection, he [the teacher] can surface and criticize the tactic understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialized practice, and make new sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness which he may allow himself to experience. (p. 61).

Joan offers a moving testament, shared by other Roundtable teachers, regarding the powerful impact the Roundtable had on her development as a teacher. She said,

I came to know people who were in that group, and then that’s how I came to realize that was my philosophy [democratic education]. You know, I hadn’t thought about it as democracy in education, and I didn’t have the background in terms of [my preparation]. Of course you do study a little bit, when you go through a Masters program, you know? But, the more I talked with these people and heard what they said, and they were personal friends . . . But the more I heard them talk, the more I thought about the ideas . . . and what it was about, and it’s bigger than even what I had been doing.

Joan’s words reveal the powerful process of praxis that the Friday Roundtables offered its participants, the power to find within themselves the ability to create lasting change. In his work “Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander” Frank Adams (1975), noted that,
“Highlander’s staff has learned to avoid telling people how to relieve their problems and has concentrated on helping people look to themselves to find their own potential and their own solutions” (p. 209). As the Roundtable teachers engaged in the hard work of thinking, reflecting and acting on their democratic ideals they developed a steadfast belief in democracy and its application to empowering education.

Guided Observation 2: A Deep Respect for Appalachia with Pragmatic Understandings:

Appreciations and Concerns

It is not through the emotionally hollow lenses of pity or disdain that the teachers in this study view their rural Appalachian students, but rather they see their students through the more emotionally expansive and less frequently employed lens of respect, dignity and care. This “guided observation” primarily addresses research question two. As I listened to and thought about the narratives of the teachers in this study I was reminded of a poem by the Appalachian poet Diane Gilliam Fisher (2003) entitled, “Free Lunch at Wedgewood Junior High.” Fisher’s poem is about distinctions, separations and the understandings a child makes of inequity. The poem written in Fishers’ signature Appalachian mountain vernacular reads as follows:

The girl I was sits at a long table,
watches the lunch line form along the window,
There are three choices for lunch here:
buy a la carte, pack a lunch from home,
fill out the form for the free lunch
served on a blue plate. She knows
how people wait together in line,
where the food is, how some come out
with whatever they want, some
with whatever they’re given.

In her brown bag are eight saltines
sandwiched with margarine, and a nickel
for milk folded into a paper napkin
like a magic trick.

The bag is too big for the lunch,
The way her dress is too big for her.

Mama had to buy it that way,
Something for me to grow into. (p. 25)

Some may question my use of poetry to bring a focus to this analysis. I can hear the
voices of the academy calling for a more “academic approach” a “research based”
approach. I am, however, taking relief from these traditional arguments under the
insightful idea about the “idea” of Appalachia of Henry Shapiro (1978). As he explored
the imaginable reality that Appalachia does not exist, Shapiro noted in “Appalachia on
our mind: The southern mountains and mountaineers in the American consciousness,
1870-1920” that,

This is not a history of Appalachia. It is a history of the idea of Appalachia, and
hence of the invention of Appalachia. It attempts to examine the origins and
consequences of the idea that the mountainous portions of eight or nine southern
states form a coherent region inhabited by a homogeneous population possessing
a uniform culture. (Emphasis mine) (p. ix)

Inevitably the idea of Appalachia and its inhabitants has become cemented into the
popular imagination of American culture as a place of “less-than” and the “white-other.”
Shapiro called this reality “the Appalachian other” as he explicated the distinctions
between the life patterns of native-born, white Anglo-Saxon, Protestant
Americans in the southern mountains and the life patterns of native-born Anglo-
Saxon Americans else-where in the nation, both North and South, that which
made the mountaineers a peculiar people and hence interesting, and which made them appear as appropriate objects of northern home-missionary work. (p. 85)

These “distinctions” became fertile ground for the multitude of “rescue” programs that proliferated and spread into the newly created and culturally unique land of Appalachia at the turn of the twentieth century. To quote Fisher (2003), the “blue plates” offered by rescue workers were often filled for mountain people “with whatever they’re given” not “with whatever they want” (p. 25). Hence the “blue plate” of what I call “Appalachian saviorism” or the rescue programs described above find themselves imbedded in the physical soil of Appalachia and fixed in the fertile psychological ground of America’s imagination.

Returning to Fisher’s poem and the Roundtable teachers, it was apparent to me as the researcher and as an Appalachian man that the teachers in this study did not offer their students the educational equivalent of the “blue plate” found in Fisher’s poem. They were not their students’ educational saviors; they were their educational partners and guides. As evidenced in their words and thinking they worked hard to help their Appalachian students emerge from “the lunch line” of education with a plate filled with their own choices. Jill’s thoughts are representative of the Roundtable teachers, “I think that a lot of teachers—the teachers that I know who are here and who are committed for a long term are—that’s part of it, they’re committed.” Jill added “they want what’s best for the students and they’re willing—in spite of incredibly low pay and lack of respect from lots of people, that they’re committed to serving and working with the kids.”

Fisher’s poem also reminds me of the “savage inequalities” found in our society, especially in our schools, mostly in poor urban and rural schools. The lack of equality
present in the schools of the United States of America is well documented by many scholars including Jonathan Kozol (1992). These inequalities include the harsh economic realities which Fisher’s poem points including the one being witnessed by the child character, involving the choices that money provides regarding food choices at lunch. Equity and fairness of educational experiences was on the minds of the Roundtable teachers and it informed their decision to facilitate democratic educational change in their schools.

Common Theme 5: Democracy’s Promise of Social Justice in Rural Appalachia

The teachers in this study asked themselves an important question, “As a teacher in Appalachia, what will we do to help our students have the best education possible?” Gail presents this idea in her case as she talked about some of the teachers who attended the Roundtables but did not work in rural Appalachian Ohio districts. She said, “It’s not that their hearts weren’t good, but they didn’t have the same struggles [that we had in the rural school]. You know, they had more of the middle class kids. I think that [for us] having the kids whose lives were not as enriched made us think more about, “How can these kids come out with as good an education as the kids whose lives started out easier?”

Several of the Roundtable teachers in this study echo the same sentiments. Linda said, “We all felt huge responsibility. Especially at [our] elementary school because these are kids of really poverty stricken families.” For many of the Roundtable teachers their work in schools of rural Appalachian Ohio pushed them to ask the fundamental question, “How can I be a better teacher?” Linda, said, “I think that that’s what drove us and we felt that we really were doing the right thing for kids.” Gail shared a similar line of thought
stating, “I think that having the kids whose lives were not as enriched made us think more about, how can these kids come out with as good an education as the kids whose lives started out easier?”

The Roundtable teachers in this study understood the promise of social justice found in the principles of democratic education. George S. Counts (1939) in his work entitled, “The Schools Can Teach Democracy” wrote that an “obligation of democratic education is to develop in the individual a profound allegiance to the principle of human equality, brotherhood, dignity and worth” (p. 18). For many of the Roundtable teachers, democratic education was not just another faddish educational pedagogy; it was a foundational part of who they were as teachers and as human beings. Gail’s anger at the inequalities found in Ohio’s funding of public education illustrates this point. She said, 

It just makes me so mad. In Ohio, we’re such a huge bad example of how unfair the system is. You know . . . the more you know about that [the inequities among Ohio’s school systems], it either makes you just throw up your hands and quit, or fight harder for these kids because they can’t fix it. You know? If I just cave in and take the easy way out or give up, then they can’t fix it themselves. There are so many things in their lives that are stacked against them.

Ben shared a similar sentiment regarding inequality. He said,

On the big picture, we certainly lack political power. I mean Voinovich [former Governor of Ohio], he was just completely oblivious to Appalachia. He wasn’t from the area and he didn’t really relate well, so he just said, “Well, that’s the way they like it, so that’s what you get. You’re from there and that’s the choice you make,” but kids don’t get to pick, of course.
A deep respect for Appalachia filled with a pragmatic, but profound, understanding of its unique challenges has helped define these teachers democratic work in the region.

**Guided Observation 3: A Resistance to Undemocratic Educational Practices: Educators and the Test**

As discussed previously, the impact of the powerful Roundtable experience coupled with a preexisting democratic leaning helped to solidify a deep commitment to the principles of democratic education among the teachers in this study. This “guided observation” primarily addresses research question one. The teachers in this study shared several stories of resistance to undemocratic educational practices in their schools. This resistance includes actions that have helped them preserve their democratic educator ethos in schools that are becoming less democratic as a result of a culture surrounding high-stakes testing and a resistance to undemocratic fellow educators both teachers and administrators. In this section I will focus on the high-stakes test and its impact on these democratic teachers as the primary example.

I think that the teachers in this study offered their strongest resistance to undemocratic practices in education in the defiant act of thinking. As they thought about their practice and their democratic values in relation to the expectations of the “high-stakes testing” culture found in many of their schools, the teachers in this study understood the incongruence between their democratic ethos and the state mandated high stakes tests. As stated in his case, Ben understands the problems associated with a single high stakes measurement of a given student’s success; the state’s mandated test. He said,
I mean you’re creating some kind of myth that you can measure schools that way, and then that’s all they need to know. I mean it’s like it’s minimizing what schools are about, and teachers. It’s all very demeaning.

For Alfie Kohn (2000), “high-stakes testing has radically altered the kind of instruction that is offered in America’s schools, to the point that ‘teaching to the test’ has become a prominent part of the nation’s educational landscape” (p. 29). In Thomas’ case a story emerged that personalizes Ben’s and Kohn’s observations about the impact of high-stakes testing on student learning. Thomas said,

The year after I retired, I read tests to kids who had IEPs (Individual Educational Plans). So part of their thing was they got the test read to them. And I could remember the social studies test because it was stupid. They had this paragraph like five inches long probably. And they’re leading these kids off in this one direction and all of a sudden at the very end; they take a twist and ask them an entirely different question than what you think they’ve wanted to ask all along. The kids are just totally like—they don’t know how to deal with it. And yet if they’ve had an education that taught them to look at things critically, to think things through, to see things as a problem to be solved rather than something to know, I think maybe they could have dealt with the test the way it was set up. But the way we’ve been—the way we taught, buckle down for success, do the workbook page, know how to do this little skill, but don’t know what context to put it in, it just was something they couldn’t deal with.

Wood (2005) offers closure to Thomas’ story saying “If it wasn’t bad enough that testing is shoving so much out the school door, think what it lets in” (p. 44). The “letting in” for
Wood is directly related to the unethical acts of promoting the testing weeks with “offers of more recess, movie privileges, and treats when a class has perfect attendance during testing week” (p. 44).

Another important “letting in” related to high-stakes testing in our schools is the outright corruption and cheating on the part of teachers, students and administrators seeking improved or higher, high-stakes test scores. Nichols and Berliner (2008), note that, “High-stakes testing creates conditions in which a great number of our most vulnerable and less advantaged students are denied a chance at a productive life” (p. 57). In part, based on this reality these authors argue that many teachers engage in “cheating” to help their students and themselves score higher on the tests. Among numerous examples included in their work, Nichols and Berliner note that

a national survey revealed that about 10 percent of the teachers admitted to providing hints about the answers during the test administration; about 10 percent of the teachers pointed out mismarked items by students; about 15 percent of the teachers provided more time for the test than was allowed; about 5 percent of the teachers engaged in instruction during the test. The survey also revealed that about 1.5 percent of teachers actually admitted that they changed student’s answers on the test. (p. 36).

These authors acknowledge that “it may be difficult for some people ever to defend acts of cheating, but it became clear to us that more moral ambiguity exists in each act we call cheating than we first imagined” (p. 35).

While the teachers in this study did not offer stories of “cheating” on the high-stakes tests, they did offer ideas of resistance related to what Herbert Kohl (1994) calls
“creative maladjustment.” For example in Gail’s narrative she discussed her schools’ use of the “Direct Instruction” method for teaching literacy. For Gail this method of instruction was an affront to her democratic ethos. She decided not to “fully” follow her principal’s expectations. She said,

I was told directly by my principal about four years ago, “You will all start Direct Instruction,” because we were saying, “We’ll start it in January. We’re going to kind of build the framework here, and we’ll start it in January.” Well at one point she said, with a pointed finger—there were three kindergarten teachers at that time—“You will all start it now.” Then I had to decide, “Do I go to her [the principal] and present my methods that I’d like to use, and my data for why I believe this can work?” and risk having her say, “No, absolutely not. Just do it the way you’re supposed to” or do I just close the door kind of my room and cheat a little bit and do what I believe and just enough of . . . Anyway, I took the coward’s way out and I closed my door. They had the scripted program for about ten minutes two times a week, and my aide does it. I don’t even touch it.

For me Gail’s action was an act of “creative maladjustment” not an act of cowardice.

Kohl explains the important subtleties found in this distinction,

When it is impossible to remain in harmony with one’s environment without giving up deeply held moral values, creative maladjustment becomes a sane alternative to giving up altogether. Creative maladjustment consists of breaking social patterns that are morally reprehensible, taking conscious control of one’s place in the environment, and readjusting the world one lives in based on personal integrity and honesty—that is, it consist of learning to survive with minimal moral
and personal compromise in a thoroughly compromised world and not being afraid of planned and willed conflict, if necessary. (p. 130)

Gail’s resistance was not in the form of a full blown conflict with her principal. She instead remained true to her democratic educational values and her deeply held believes about what is best for her students.

As I listened to the narratives of the teachers in this study I am convinced that the primary resistance that they offer to the high-stakes testing culture that is infecting their schools is not found only in their larger collective actions, but in their everyday individual principled actions. The Roundtable teachers in this work have developed democratic educational philosophies that penetrate deeply into their pedagogy, a philosophy and pedagogy that heavily informs their curriculum delivery. They are not easily bullied, pushed, or swayed into relinquishing their democratic way of being by the pressure for higher student test scores. Thomas’ words support my argument. He said,

The fact is that the tests and preparing students for the tests have become so important. And people—I think there’s two ways to look at this. One is the test is the only thing that’s important, so we got all these little discreet skills and knowledge and we have to teach those. That’s what the kids have to do. And the other way would be to say, “Well, we just—we have to have kids who use their minds well and have been immersed in using all these skills and knowledge and are used to figuring things out if they don’t know them rather than just saying, “I know it. I don’t know it.” We’ve gone the first way. I think the second way would be better. I think the second way has always – it builds on what has always made our country great, the ability to look at things and figure them out. And it’s
not just – I don't know. I just think that we’ve gone the wrong direction. We’ve killed student initiative. We have said that kids and communities are not what is most important. I don’t think we have to have taken that route. I think we could live with the test.

Thomas’ words offer a glimpse of the true measure of the teachers in this studies resistance to the undemocratic practices in their schools. It is not in their acts of conflict, but their thoughtful use of the principles of democracy to artfully negotiate the educationally rancid environments created by the culture of high-stakes testing as they act in the best interests of their students.

Uncommon Utterances

As explained earlier in this study I am using the term “uncommon utterances” (UU) in reference to the powerful, profound and unique utterances that emerged during the course of the interviews with the teachers of this study. These words or phrases are unique in that they were often too brief or limited to constitute a theme, but too powerful to be discarded. In the course of this study’s interview phase several “uncommon utterances” came forward. In the following section four of the most interesting “uncommon utterances” are explicated and analyzed in this following section including: “non-doers” and two “uncommon utterances” centering on issues of control: “ten years” and “free range.” The final “uncommon utterances” in this section is “hamburgers.”

“Non-Doers”

Erin discussed her school’s official state rating of “excellent” and how most of the school’s students were test trained. In addition the students were very competitive regarding their performance on the high-stakes tests. She said regarding the students at
her school, “the kids are test-driven; they’ve been trained since kindergarten to test and do well on tests. And they test every subject, every grade level, even if it’s not part of the achievement tests.” In reality not all students do well in this type of competitive, high pressure environment. For Nicholas and Berliner (2008), the pressure of the high stakes testing culture and “the consequences of repeated test failure are especially de-motivating and demoralizing” (p. 158).

Erin used the term “non-doer” to describe children who were not “test-driven” or who under performed on the high stakes tests at her school. These students’ underperformance “stood out” in Erin’s school because of the school’s strong focus on the students’ “excellent” scores on the state’s high-stakes tests. The term “non-doer” caught my ear as an “uncommon utterance.” No other participant in the study discussed this phenomenon or these students.

In her case Erin said several things about the “non-doers.” First she noted that they are often not the children of the schools affluent population. She said, “And there’s a discrepancy with money, you know you won’t see kids that come from an affluent background being the non-doers . . . And here, they stand out.” Erin also noted that “They have a lot of stuff taken away from them” including recess. Erin said, “A lot of teachers make them stay in every lunch to work . . . there’s a couple kids that haven’t been outside to recess for months because they’re forced to stay in and work every time.” Finally, she noted that one student had lost interest in being able to have a recess and Erin said “I think they lose hope.”

Erin’s use of the term “non-doer” was deliberate. For me this represents a significant and unique application of democracy. By referring to these students as “non-
doers” Erin does not pass judgment on them. The type of judgment I am thinking of in this instance is the students focused deficient based judgments in which students are labeled as “lazy” or “behavior disordered.” Erin’s use of the term “non-doer” allowed her to place the school and its culture into the equation as she tried to understand how best to serve this student. As presented in her case she asked him, “how do we work it so you can go out every Friday?” In her encouragement to the student she included the word “we.”

Nicholas and Berliner (2008) argue that under-performing students are often seen as a problem in high stakes test score-driven schools due to their “suppressing” effect on schools test score performance (p. 59). Specifically, they note, that “a low-scoring student, a score-suppressor . . . has little value in a school that is judged through high-stakes testing” (p. 59). By viewing students as “test-suppressor’s” instead of students in need assistance, or as Erin calls them, “non-doers” educators are effectively redefining the relationship between students and teachers. Alfie Kohn (2000) writes that,

A superintendent in Florida observed that, “when a low-performing child walks into a classroom, instead of being seen as a challenge, or an opportunity for improvement, for the first time since I’ve been in education, teachers are seeing [that child] as a liability.” (p. 28)

For Kohn this type of teacher attitude toward students erodes the possibility of developing the type of educational relationship needed for learning. He writes, “if educators resent children who are likely, for one reason or another, to perform poorly, they cannot establish the nurturing relationship with those children that will enable the children to trust them” (p. 28).
The “non-doers” in Erin’s school represent a population of students who are being systematically discarded by un-democratic school practices used in the name of higher academic standards derived by high-stakes testing as the single measure of school achievement. The “non-doers” as described by Erin who find themselves in “high performing” or “excellent” schools are of particular interest to me as an educational researcher. The literature seems to primarily point to under performing schools as places where “pushing students” out is used to help raise test scores (Nicholas and Berliner, 2007; Wood 2005). The literature does not point to excellent schools and the reality of the daily experiences of their underperforming students.

The loss of hope described by Erin’s “non-doer” could be interpreted, in the words of John Gatto (2005), as a “prison sentence.” Specifically, Gatto noted that, “school is a twelve-year jail sentence where bad habits are the only curriculum truly learned” (p. 19). If students lose “hope” and begin to see school as a place that is uncomfortable and where they are not welcomed how can we expect them to perform academically?

Control: Free Range and Ten Years

Control is an often talked about element of schools (Dewey, 1916; Finn, 1999; Shor, 1992, Wood, 2005). For Shor, (1992) teachers are often the primary character in the daily performance of school, as a result “education is something done to students by teachers” (p. 102). Shor observes that some teachers also “lack the experience, maturity, or support to allow their students freedom. They relieve their insecurity by imposing stern discipline and a rigid curriculum on students” (p. 102). As teachers employ a “stern” strategy in their classrooms Shor argues that this “frees” them from the important task of
“having to meet the students on their own terms, in their own culture and language” and more importantly “from inventing a critical and democratic education with them” (p. 102).

In her narrative Jill used the term “free range” to describe democratic classrooms. Specifically she said,

In certain classrooms students had free range. They could get up whenever they wanted, they could go into the hall, they could go to the bathroom, they could sharpen their pencil, and they could pretty much leave, come and go as they wanted. And I felt that that was detrimental to the learning of the majority of the students, because there was a lack of respect for other students’ learning . . . And it was sort of under the guise of “I’m being and we’re being democratic.” The students have all the choices. And they ended up sort of controlling the learning environment . . . chaotic is a good word [to describe it].

Wood (2005) tells the story of a senior student in his school that “had married her steady boyfriend . . . by her own choice” and was at school, a productive and high performing student (p. 124). He explained, that at home she and her husband were buying a house, and she was the person primarily responsible for managing “all the family finances: paying bills, budgeting the income, filling out the income tax forms” and other household duties and chores (p. 124). However, she was not able to go to the toilet in her school without a hall pass. Wood offers a solid critique of the control being exerted over this student noting “how absurd it was that a young woman who could manage a family and home income outside of school was not deemed responsible enough in school to decide when it would be appropriate to use the toilet” (p. 125).
I find the term “free range” an interesting concept because when applied in other areas of our society it is considered a positive or desirable occurrence. For example, I find it ironic that in our society we value the free range experiences of poultry but tolerate the caged or controlled experiences of our children in schools. I am not trying to make light of the impact that controlling children in schools can have on both students and teachers. Students in our schools are asked to conform to standards of behavior and immobility that most adults in our society would find difficult to embrace. Furthermore, we expect our nation’s teachers to maintain control of the students in our schools at almost all costs. Beth’s narrative illustrates how the expected and demanded extreme control of students impacts a teacher. She said,

It actually took me ten years to talk about my first two years of teaching because they were so awful. I was ready to leave the classroom when I moved here. I was witness to some pretty yucky stuff there, including teachers physically grabbing kids and throwing them up against walls to get them to do what they wanted them to do. I was known for being a good teacher because I could keep control of my classroom. I come from a family of educators. My dad was a principal. My dad, you know, he had kind of an iron-fist approach, so I knew what to do to get people, you know, to behave, but I wasn’t doing any teaching. My kids were more humane than I was at some point. I mean I didn’t hurt – you know, I didn’t physically hurt anybody, but I wasn’t teaching them anything. It was all about maintaining control.”

I value teacher’s helping students learn to stay on task, or a teachers desire to have their classroom function in an educative manner so all students can learn, I am, however,
pushing against the systems of thinking and action in our schools that narrowly view education as only really happening and being “serious when the teacher talks and students listen” (Shor, 1992, p. 102).

**Hamburgers**

During Ben’s interview as he discussed state educational standards he mentioned hamburgers. At the time this seemed an odd or uncommon thing to say regarding education. Specifically, Ben shared a sense of frustration regarding the State of Ohio’s philosophical position as presented by a person sent to help teachers understand the states expectations related to educational standards. Ben shared,

I mean the standards movement is—we had a guy come to our school and he said,

“You know how you go to McDonald's and buy a hamburger anywhere, and you know it’s going be about the same?” He said, “That’s how it should be with kids.”

We [the teachers in my school] were just staring at him like, “What the hell are you talking about?” There’s the notion that all kids should have the same experiences . . . The [school] ‘standards movement’ was created with this notion that you can do that, that all that matters is creating this standard body of knowledge.

I remember the anguished look on Ben’s face as he said, “I think that’s all I have to say about that.” Ben’s comments reminded me of the work of Eric Schlosser (2001) who wrote “Fast Food Nation.”

In his book Schlosser explains the process that the McDonalds’ corporation used to ensure that all hamburgers in their chain tasted the same regardless of the location of purchase. He wrote, “It was a McDonald’s executive named Fred Turner who created a
production system of unusual thoroughness and attention to detail . . . Hamburgers were always to be placed on the grill in six neat rows; french fries had to be exactly 0.28 inches thick” (p. 69). Schlosser notes that the McDonalds cooperation has worked very diligently to create a kitchen “full of buzzers and flashing lights that tell employees what to do” (p. 70). Ultimately these types of practices “makes workers increasingly interchangeable” and “the management no longer depends upon the skills or talents of its workers—those things are built into the operating system and machines” (p. 70). He notes that “jobs that have been ‘de-skilled’ can be filled cheaply . . . any individual worker is greatly reduced by the ease with which he or she can be replaced” (p. 70).

The “de-skilling” of workers is not limited to the corporate sector. Apple and Beane (1995) note that “the consequent ‘de-skilling’ of teachers, the redefinition of their work as the implementation of others’ ideas and plans, is among the most obvious, and unbefitting, examples of how democracy has been dissolving in our schools” (p. 18). In essence this amounts to the ludicrous notation that it is a desirable and productive practice to as some have called it “teacher proof” the curriculum” (Weiner, 1994). Gail explained the degrading nature of “teacher proofing” as she talked about the “direct instructions method.” She said,

The guy who came up with this particular program, “Direct Instruction”. . . He says something to the effect of, “I don’t give a whit about teacher’s creativity or kids’ desire to learn. I have made a foolproof program. You cannot go wrong. If you carry out this program, kids will learn to read.” It was kind of reading for dummies and is about as undemocratic as you can be.
Nichols and Berliner (2008), explain that “as high-stakes testing programs continue, the role of ‘teacher’ as a professional with decision making responsibility seems likely to be sufficiently downgraded to such an extent that they will end up resembling technicians and trainers” (p. 168). For me this is an unacceptable and concerning development in the practice of education. The Roundtable teacher’s in this study remain unwilling to succumb to the de-skilling effects of those who think educational change includes the reduction of teachers to technicians.

**Conclusion**

As I bring closure to this chapter it is important that I express my sincerest appreciation and gratitude to the Roundtable teachers found in this study. Their dedication to democracy and democratic education as expressed in their words has helped me more fully understand the promises found in our collective democratic experiment; in addition they answer the two primary questions of this study. In the following section I will briefly review these two research questions and their respective answers.

**Research Question One**

The research question “How and why these self identified democratic educators maintain their commitment to democratic pedagogical practice in the face of political policies that call for the reduction of democracy in the classroom through centralized, standardized and predetermined outcome measures” was answered in the following way.

1. Several of the teachers in this study came to the Roundtable meetings with an existing belief system and educational practice that leaned in the direction of democracy.
2. The participants of this study developed a democratic world view that went beyond their school life and into their personal lives.

3. These democratic teachers believed in the promise that democratic education helps people develop a lifetime of democratic citizenship.

4. Many of the teachers in this study have personal values that inform and guide their democratic practices in the classroom.

5. The intensive experiences of the Friday Roundtable helped to prepare these educators for a lifetime of democratic educational praxis by providing a supportive, reflective and action oriented environment that facilitated a deeply meaningful learning experience.

6. The teachers in this research developed a strong democratic educational philosophy that helped them resist undemocratic educational practices. This resistance included their willingness to “maladjust” to undemocratic educational expectations.

Research Question Two

The research question, “How these self identified democratic educators understand and define democratic education in their teaching practice in an underserved, under resourced and underrepresented population of students and families (generally working class and/or rural working poor people in Appalachian Ohio)” was answered in the following manner.

1. The teachers in this study hold a deep respect for the people of rural Appalachian Ohio.

2. The participants in this research demanded that the children of rural Appalachian Ohio receive an education that would rival that of most privileged children in the state of Ohio.
3. The teachers in this study understand that democratic education and its practice can further the cause for social justice and equity in rural Appalachian Ohio’s underfunded and under resourced schools.

In closing, I have the utmost respect for the Roundtable teachers’ strong commitment to democracy and its application to education. Through their narratives they have explained the important and impactful experiences they had as members of the Friday Roundtable. It was their Roundtable experience, often coupled with a prior democratic leaning that helped these educators sustain themselves as they make their long walk with democratic education in rural Appalachian Ohio.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This study is a Narrative Inquiry; as such it rests on the stories or narratives of the eleven teachers’ interviews found in chapter four. The study used these teachers’ understandings of their work in their classroom and larger school experiences as its primary data. In addition, this research is an Appreciative Inquiry; specifically it did not attempt to critique these teachers’ understandings of democratic education or their application of its concepts to their educational practice. In this research study the interviews were analyzed using a case study design. The teachers were part of a group of teachers who participated in a grassroots organization they called the “Friday Roundtable.” Importantly, most of these teachers claim the title democratic or progressive. This research did try to understand and value the experiences of democratic teachers by utilizing the most knowledgeable of all participants; the people who lived the experience.

In this study’s final analysis of the Friday Roundtable two things stand out as fundamental to helping its participants maintain an enduring democratic commitment: support and praxis. These two things, the support of democratic colleagues and the ability to think deeply, reflect and act on their democratic philosophies provided the teachers in this study with the fortitude to maintain their democratic educational pedagogies and practices. Thankfully, they were able to lean on and employ their strong grounding in democracy as they faced the undemocratic educational mandates being peddled by both the state and national policy makers.
In addition, the Roundtable teachers in this research remained true to their
democratic core values as they worked with rural Appalachian Ohio students. This study
provides a space to appreciate the voices of teachers working in an underprivileged
portion of rural Appalachian Ohio. The democratic educators found in these pages have
remained hopeful and encouraging of their Appalachian students while simultaneously
understanding the realities and limitations of poverty. The teachers in this study have
maintained and acted on the democratic promise for equity that emerges when democracy
is practiced, lived and experienced every day.

The narratives in this study represent more than a collection of stories; they
represent the culmination of many years of hard work on the part of 11 teachers who
dedicated themselves to democratic education. These narratives represent what is
educationally possible in the United States. We, as a nation, cannot surrender the
responsibility to teach our children the principles and philosophical ideals of democracy.
In addition, we should not deny our children their best opportunity to practice democracy,
especially when the opportunities are found inside their schools. The democratic teachers
in this study illustrate the positive and powerful foundation a democratic ethos provides
for people as they move through life in what should be a democratic society. However,
we cannot have a full and robust democracy if we are denied the opportunities to learn
how to live in and maintain such a democracy.

This research study also moved beyond a simple description of the group’s
democratic practices and explored how and why these self-identified democratic
educators maintained their commitments to democratic pedagogical practice in the face
of political educational policies that call for the reduction of democracy in the classroom
through centralized, universal and predetermined outcome measures or “high stakes
testing.” Part of this study’s significance in its ability to illuminate a career long
dedication to democratic educational practice by teachers who in the face of significant
challenges remained democratic. This study offers a unique understanding of the
triumphs, disappointments, steadfastness and, at times, the messy nature of democracy as
practiced by dedicated teachers in the rural classrooms of Appalachian Ohio.

I firmly believe that their dedication to democracy represents the strength of will
some teachers hold that turns their beliefs into meaningful educational action and nods in
the direction of what American public education should strive to become by holding us
accountable to the ideals of our democracy. These ideals include, but are not limited to
treating all children equally as citizens in training by helping them to practice the
“attitudes and values derived from our often time forgotten democratic traditions”
(Bullough, 1988, p. 19). In describing these “attitudes and values” Bullough (1988) notes
that,

these are much more difficult to identify and more controversial, but nonetheless
fundamental. Social sensitivity, the ability to stand in the other person’s shoes, is
one such attitude. Another is the willingness to suspend judgment, to tolerate,
even honor, differences and compromise. A third is the ability to live with
ambiguity and to accept uncertainty. And, still another is the courage and the
willingness to take risks in defense of principles. None of these skills or attitudes
develop naturally. Our schools and colleges must provide young people with
experiences that will foster their development. (p. 19).
The teachers in this study often acted with courage in the defense of their core democratic beliefs.

Furthermore, the teachers in this research acted as advocates for their Appalachian students by demanding equal educational opportunities for their often underprivileged pupils. Noted intellectual and scholar James Baldwin (1955) argued that education should empower people, all people, to see the world for themselves and to develop the ability to make informed decisions. He observed,

> The paradox of education is precisely this—that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated. The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself . . . But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What society really, ideally wants is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. (p. 326)

Their student advocacy centered primarily on their actions as democratic teachers to further the tenets of democracy in their classrooms and helped to neutralize the type of education that replicates the status quo and prevents students from asking difficult and informed questions about their world. In this chapter I offer my conclusions, recommendations and suggestions for future research related to this research project.

**Conclusion**

In its totality, this study is about a group of practicing teachers who came to call themselves the Friday Roundtable and spent significant time trying to answer the collective question “How can we be better teachers?” For these teachers working in rural
Appalachian Ohio, this question raises the specific concern about improving the inequitable educational experiences of students. The Roundtable teachers developed a democratic educational layer that was not easily penetrated by undemocratic ideas and educational practices. This study’s findings illuminate the lasting impact a meaningful, focused, and democratic experience, such as the Roundtable, can have on teachers willing to allow their teaching philosophy, practice and in some cases, life outlook to be shaped by their values.

In its final turn this study is about a group of teachers who came together, many with an existing democratic leaning, and engaged in the hard work of any democracy: listening, arguing, debating, and reflecting on ideas as they defined and solidified their collective and individual democratic teaching philosophies. The solidification of democratic values influenced their educational philosophy and served as an internalized core position for many of these teachers as they responded to, reacted against and at times resisted undemocratic practices and policies in their schools. The undemocratic policies and practices described by the teachers were often the result of the undemocratic educational practices coming from the state and national level including the latest assessment pressures stemming from the “No Child Left Behind Act.”

Recommendations

As I conclude this research study I move forward the following recommendations. Each recommendation is directly related to the following: democratic education, the Roundtable teacher’s development and my analysis as the researcher. These recommendations are:
1. The development of a Masters level teacher education program designed to mirror the work of the Roundtables and the Highlander Education and Research Center.

2. The expectation that public schools must teach democracy and serve as a steward of democracy in a democratic society.

3. The recognition among teacher preparation programs that teacher candidates need a strong foundational grounding in educational philosophy and pedagogy.

In the following section I will further explain each of the two recommendations.

_A Graduate Program: The Roundtable Model_

I opened this research study with a quotation from Myles Horton (2003) noting his instance that democracy must be part of our daily living if we want to have democracy. He said,

I think it is important to understand that the quality of the process you use to get to a place determines the ends, so when you want to build a democratic society, you have to act democratically in every way. (p. XIII-XIV)

Horton’s belief in the lived experience of democracy as a way to help others understand a life of democratic action lies at the heart of the Highlander Education and Research Center he helped found. At Highlander participants come together to address difficult issues in a democratic manner, much like the Roundtable teachers.

The powerful and life changing experience of the Roundtable as articulated by the teacher narratives in this study stand as an example of democracy’s potential to impact teacher’s thinking and practice. Horton (2003) argued that,
if we are to think seriously about liberating people to cope with their own lives, we must refuse to limit the educational process to what can go on only in schools. The bars must come down; the doors must fly open; nonacademic life—*real* life—must be encompassed by education. (p. 242)

Unlike Horton, I remain hopeful that institutions, especially graduate colleges, have the potential to dramatically impact the real life experiences of students. Graduate level teacher education is uniquely situated to encourage the connections between theoretical underpinnings and the real life applications that Horton demands must occur if education is to have a lasting impact because its students are often working teachers.

I agree with Horton that we need to think differently about how education works. He said, “Multiple approaches must be invented, each one considered educative in its own right” (p. 242). Based on the Roundtable teachers’ experiences and the work of Highlander I recommend that a Masters level teacher education program be conceived and implemented that would make this type of democratic, practice based, collegial learning the heart of its philosophy, pedagogy and curriculum.

The majority of teacher preparation programs situated in Colleges and Schools of Education tend to prepare students to become teachers who can carry out the demands of state and federal educational mandates. Many teacher preparation candidates are given little reason to or knowledge of how to challenge the existing status quo of schooling or the political mandates imposed on them. Hence, they enter classrooms and often, without knowing, uphold the status quo which evidence suggests leaves out many children.
A Focus on Democracy: The Public School as the Steward of an Idea

A long list of scholars have observed, explicated and researched the relentless degree to which schooling in the United States is critiqued, prodded, politicized, and changed in the name of higher academic standards. Often these changes center on the urgency expressed by many politicians and business people to raise student math and science scores on various standardized measurements, many of which hold stiff consequences or high-stakes if failed.

I recommend that the same scrutiny and sense of urgency be given to the ideas and philosophical foundations of democracy. Drawing on the impassioned arguments found in the work of early twentieth century scholars like James Mursell, Myles Horton, and George S. Counts and more modern scholars such as James Baldwin, Cornel West, Michael Apple, Frank Adams and Deborah Meier, I move beyond the politeness of a recommendation to the declarative statement that “Our School Must Teach Democracy.” Furthermore, the public schools of the United States must hold the ideals of democracy in public trust because schools are uniquely positioned to be one of the primary sites of early democratic practice which can be experienced by our nation’s children.

In fact, in a democracy, public schools are charged with educating all young people to participate in the development and suitability of a deeply seated democratic ethos. This deeply seated democratic ethos is not the shallow understanding of democracy learned in civics class where one learns the three branches of government and how a bill becomes a law. Regrettably, this hollow reduction of democracy does not teach children how to be democratic citizens. At the risk of sounding redundant, democracy must be lived in order to make it part of our collective citizen-based democratic ethos.
The words of John Mursell (1955) ring loudly in my mind as I make this demand, “There is only one possible honest purpose for education in a democratic society, and that is to support and extend democracy. Moreover, education must fulfill this purpose not in word alone, but also in deed,” (p. 4). I think it is only through the practice, application and living of democratic ideas in our schools that we can, as a nation, fully realize our collective creativity, intellect and promise as citizens.

*Teacher Candidates: “Who am I as a Teacher?”*

The teachers in this study often commented on the impact the Roundtable experience had on their development as teachers. For several of these teachers the Roundtable was an important experience because it helped them clarify their educational and life values and philosophies. For some of the teachers in this study their Roundtable experience was more meaningful than their formal undergraduate and graduate school training. For these teachers the solidification of educational values and philosophies helped them maintain a democratic centeredness in the face of undemocratic educational policies and practices.

As a result I recommend that undergraduate teacher preparation programs spend more time, significant time, on the foundational elements of education, with a focus on helping teacher-candidates answer the question, “Who am I as a teacher?” This question must be answered both from as a philosophical development and a values-based perspective. Entry level teachers, like Jill and Erin, both articulated the pedagogical and personal benefits that came to them as they participated in this opportunity early in their careers.
Future Research

This research study has sparked my thinking in several areas including: teacher preparation, student learning, educational philosophical foundations, the importance of democratic education for a democracy as well as the impact of undemocratic and potentially harmful policies in schools. I remain fascinated by the teachers in this study and their steadfast belief in the powerful educative potential of democratic education. In this section I will suggest several areas for future research. The first will address the narratives of students and families who are the pupils of democratic teachers. The second suggestion focuses on teacher resistance, including the potential lack of resistance to undemocratic policies and practices. A third suggestion deals with democratic education’s potential to address social inequity in rural Appalachia.

Let the People Speak: Students and Families of Democratic Teachers

As explained earlier it was not in the scope of this study to research the narratives of students and families working with democratic teachers. As a result, this is a natural place to continue this research. The voices and experiences of students and their families especially in rural Appalachian Ohio schools are not easily found in the literature. A study of their meaning making, expectations, understandings and experiences with democratic teachers—teachers who are practicing democratic education—would provide a rich and informative dimension to the literature in both educational studies and Appalachian studies.

Teacher Resistance in Schools: Resistance to What?

This research study helped me more fully appreciate the important role educational philosophy development has in relation to a teacher’s understanding of who
they are in the classroom. I firmly believe that this understanding can help them resist policies and practices harmful to students obtaining an empowering education in their schools. Further research needs to be conducted to help bring clarification to the question “how and where do teachers develop a ‘lifelong’ teaching philosophy?” Imbedded in this suggestion is the important observation that a school practice or state policy or federal mandate is not the same thing as a teaching philosophy, nor are they a substitute for the hard work of educative values-based development on the part of a teacher. Because of the insistence on high stakes assessments in the United States and the continued de-skilling of teachers as identified earlier, I am concerned about the potential for teachers in our nation to move through their early preparation and initial professional licensure process without having fully explored their teaching philosophy and educative values.

Appalachia, Education and Equity

For many people Appalachia is the place of the hillbilly, the moonshiner and the family feudist. I also argue that for many, especially non-Appalachians, the notion of scholarship is not often attributed to Appalachian people when asked to describe a person from Appalachia. This study offers a focused educational lens by which to observe the potential educational impact dedicated and informed teachers can have with students from rural Appalachia. The research literature indicates that rural and working class students often find themselves in schools that are underfunded, authoritarian and less-than academically challenging. The negative images of Appalachia, as stated throughout this research and often held by people not from the region, are sadly being supported by inequitable educational practices (e.g., funding, curriculum choices). Additional research
should be conducted on democratic education’s potential to help reduce the impact a socially unjust society has on rural Appalachia Ohio.

In closing, I must thank the democratic teachers in this study and those found in other pockets of this country for their commitment to the ideals of democracy. I am especially indebted to the Roundtable teachers, especially those willing to share their stories, but more importantly to the pedagogical life they work hard to live—demonstrating their untiring commitment and belief in the power of a robust democracy. I am appreciative of and inspired by their continued reaching toward the ideals of democracy as they moved forward on the long walk that is our unending project with a democratic way of being.
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The Appalachian Region

Source: Appalachian Regional Commission

March 12, 2002
APPENDIX B

A determination has been made that the following research study is exempt from IRB review because it involves:

Category 2 - research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior.

Project Title: The Long Walk with Democracy: Democratic Teacher Narratives in Rural Appalachian Ohio

Project Director: Mike Hess

Department: Educational Studies

Advisor: Jaylynne Hutchinson

Robin Stack, C.I.P., Human Subjects Research Coordinator
Office of Research Compliance

Date: 08/09/07

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved by the IRB (as an amendment) prior to implementation.
Dear ,

Hello! My name is Michael Hess and I am a doctoral student at Ohio University in the College of Education’s Cultural Studies in Education program. I am writing to invite your participation in my doctoral study entitled, “The Long Walk with Democracy: Democratic Teacher Narratives in Rural Appalachian Ohio.”

The focus of this research study is to understand the work and lived experiences of democratic educators teaching in this region of Southeast Ohio. In my research study I will utilize narrative and appreciate inquiry to explore the commitments, understandings and practices of democratic educators. To do this, I will conduct narrative interviews with participants who identify themselves as democratic or progressive educators and who choose to participate.

I was given your name as a potential participant by my dissertation director, Dr. Jaylynne Hutchinson, a former director of the Institute for Democracy in Education. Dr. Hutchinson suggested that your teaching commitments and experiences would inform my narrative appreciative research study on this topic.

Enclosed with this letter is a copy of the study’s Informed Consent letter that more fully describes this project and how it will be carried out. I invite you to read through this letter. If you choose to participate in this study, you would be asked to participate in a one-on-one open-ended interview that would last no more than 1 – 1/2 hours and would be held at a time and place convenient to you. In addition, all participants and the information they provide will remain anonymous and participants will be known only by pseudonyms.

I will contact you with a follow-up phone call within a few days of receipt of this letter to discuss any questions you have and inquire whether you are willing to participate in this research study that has the potential to help our educational system appreciate the effectiveness and importance of democratic education and those educators who practice it.

If you have questions and would like to speak with me prior to my contact with you, feel free to contact me via any of the phone numbers or email listed below. I look forward to talking with you soon. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Michael Hess, Ph.D. Student
Cultural Studies in Education
Ohio University

Home: 698-0558
Office: 593-4099
Email: hessm@ohio.edu
APPENDIX D
OHIO UNIVERSITY CONSENT FORM

Title of Research: The Long Walk with Democracy: Democratic Teacher Narratives in Rural Appalachian Ohio

Principal Investigator: Mike Hess

Department: Educational Studies

Federal and university regulations require signed consent for participation in research involving human subjects. After reading the statements below, please indicate your consent by signing this form.

Explanation of Study

The purpose of this research study is to describe and analyze the narratives of democratic teachers, specifically those teaching in rural Appalachia. I will gather the narratives of self-identified democratic teachers working in rural Appalachian Ohio. Particular attention will be given to the educative context and practice in rural Appalachia as it intersects with the social construction of socio-economic class, regional stereotypes and K-12 student academic struggle and/or success.

This study does not intend to identify a problem, but rather it strives to explore the narratives of democratic teachers from a positive point of view in order to appreciate what it is that informs and motivates these teachers. By gathering the narrative teaching histories of people who have committed a significant portion of their lives to an ideal of democratic or progressive education I hope to more fully understand their motivations and experiences as democratic educators. These teachers have chosen this path often in the face of obstacles that might suggest a less thorny path could have been followed (e.g., simply following the mandated curriculum related to high stake standardized testing or by not challenging the status quo in schools that are organized in an autocratic or hieratical manner). I view this commitment as a choice these teachers made in relation to their educational philosophy and practice that speaks to the deep commitments they have for living democratically. Hence, their choice to be democratic educators was made from a philosophical position that has potentially allowed democracy to be lived in their classrooms everyday regardless of the forces working against its success. By understanding these teacher narratives, commitments and practices, I hope to shed light on how educators can be in the classroom while practicing and living their pedagogical and personal commitments. This should be of interest to in-service and pre-service teachers and university teacher educators.
Participants will participate in a semi-structured interview designed to explore their democratic ideas, their educational practices related to their understanding of how learning occurs in democratic classrooms, how they have persevered as democratic teachers and their understanding of how standardization from external forces has effected their pedagogy and understanding of themselves as educators in this region.

**Procedures to be followed**

1. As a prospective participant you were initially contacted by letter via U.S. mail or e-mail in order to determine your level of interest in participation.

2. During a follow-up phone you verbally agreed to be part of the study and we arranged a date and time for you to attend a face-to-face interview.

3. At this time, I will explain the project and provide you with a consent form. You will be asked to sign the consent form indicating your willingness to allow your interview to be utilized for the purposes of this research study.

4. If you give consent you agree to participate in a one-on-one semi-structured interview that will last no more than 1 hour and 30 minutes.

**Duration of subject's participation**

You will agree to participate in a one-on-one interview. In addition, you may be asked, over the next 12 months, to participate in a follow-up conversation/interview.

**Risks and Discomforts**

You could experience a slight risk from your current employer (school district or building personnel) who may be unhappy with your participation. Permission to conduct this research is not required from your school, so unless you inform them no school official would be aware of your participation.

**Benefits**

Often the opportunity for self-reflection on one’s teaching practice is found to be a valuable asset to teachers. Having an opportunity to articulate and share your pedagogical belief systems and practice could be a positive reflective experience.

**Confidentiality and Records**

The tape recordings or digital data of the one-on-one interviews will be stored in the investigator’s office in a locked file drawer or in the investigator’s home in a locked file cabinet. Only the investigator and a transcriber will have access to the data. The tapes or digital data will be destroyed after the completion of the transcription process.
I will maintain complete confidentiality of responses and participant names. Pseudonyms will be used in place of your actual name.

Contact Information

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact:

**Primary Researcher:**
Michael Hess  
Department of Educational Studies  
Ohio University  
Athens, Ohio 45701  
Phone: 698-0558  
Email: hessm@ohio.edu

**Dissertation Committee Chair:**
Dr. Jaylynne Hutchinson  
Associate Professor  
Department of Educational Studies  
321 McCracken Hall  
Ohio University  
Athens Ohio, 45701  
Phone: 593-9827  
Email: hutchinj@ohio.edu

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664.

I certify that I have read and understand this consent form and agree to participate as a subject in the research described. I agree that known risks to me have been explained to my satisfaction and I understand that no compensation is available from Ohio University and its employees for any injury resulting from my participation in this research. I certify that I am 18 years of age or older. My participation in this research is given voluntarily. I understand that I may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which I may otherwise be entitled. I certify that I have been given a copy of this consent form to take with me.

Signature: ________________________________

Date: ________________________________

Printed Name: ________________________________
APPENDIX E

Semi-Structured One-on-One Interview Questions

1. What does it mean to you to be a democratic or progressive educator?
2. How did you come to a “democratic” orientation?
3. Who are you as a democratic teacher?
4. What are the core factors that give life to your teaching?
5. Describe a high-point in your career—a time when you were most alive and engaged.
6. In what ways is democratic or progressive teaching different than other types of teaching?
7. How did/do you employ democratic education in your classrooms?
8. How do you approach classroom management?
9. What have been your struggles as a democratic teacher? Triumphs?
10. How have you maintained a democratic/progressive teaching approach?
   a. During changing political times?
   b. Under different pressures from districts and administrators to conform to state and national trends (e.g., the No Child Left Behind Act).
11. Have you had the opportunity to help new teachers understand democratic teaching? Can you describe this/these experience(s)?
12. How do democratic teachers in Appalachia respond to the Appalachian context?
13. Without being modest, what is it that you most value about yourself, your work, and your democratic teaching?
14. What three wishes do you have to enhance the health and vitality of your democratic educational practice?
15. Can you suggest other democratic or progressive teachers that I should consider interviewing?
### Individual Case Themes

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## Individual Case Themes

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