

Fall 2002

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Joy Cohen

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### Recommended Citation

Cohen, Joy (2002) "The Standard of Democracy: Towards a Truly Democratic Curriculum," *Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/jppp/vol2/iss2/7>

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# The Standard of Democracy: Towards a Truly Democratic Curriculum

Joy Cohen

## Introduction

Research indicates that students benefit cognitively and managerially when they are permitted to take some control of their learning through curriculum design (Good, 1998). This control is achieved through the use of collaborative groups and peer decision making during which students design courses of study based on their interests. As a result of this student-directed curriculum, studies cite increased educational productivity (Levin, 1993), sharpened literacy skills (Good, 1998), enhanced individual cognition (Grace, 1999), a more collaborative sense of learning and a better understanding of conflict resolution (Lenenski & McLaughlin, 1998). In my own classroom, I have observed what is possible when students are given the opportunity to exercise freedom of choice and take responsibility for their learning by engaging in a dialogue with me about the curriculum. This crucial dialogue not only allows, but also encourages, all learners to express their interests and to find appropriate and challenging ways to share their learning. Such reciprocity between students and teachers constructs a more democratic and collaborative curriculum that includes the learners in deliberating their own education. I have witnessed the potential of this empowering practice and the transformation that occurs as a result. This democratic curriculum model focuses, not only on individual rights as students pursue their own interests, but on the responsibility of each individual to society as they seek out ways to share and express those interests in a constructive and developmentally appropriate manner. And while it is clear to me that there are many academic and developmental benefits to be gained, it is also clear that without such an opportunity, we are essentially depriving our students of the right to be democratic.

Public education in the United States emerged from the goals of a democratic society: to prepare people to become responsible citizens, to enhance individual happiness and enrich individual lives (ASCD, 1996). The very idea of the public elementary school, as conceived in the mind of Horace Mann (1796- 1859), was intended to bring democracy into the classroom. Mann acknowledged that the need for public education was two-fold. On a practical level, public education would produce a more educated population of citizens, which would ultimately result in a more productive economy. On an idealistic level, public education would assist society in identifying and nurturing the strengths, talents, and interests of each and every child regardless of race, class, or ability. While Americans embraced the practical intentions of public education, the idealistic aspects of Mann's vision were met with protest. Americans were concerned that public education would produce overeducated citizens who would question authority. Many saw the word "individual" as a contradiction to democracy and thought that any schooling that would promote self-interest was an obstacle to an individual's responsibility to the "common good" of society. And while public education in the United States prevailed, today's public education is, I am afraid, not what Horace Mann had envisioned as one that would bring democracy into the

classroom. Democratic in theory perhaps (public education is free and accessible to all children), but to suggest that our public schools are democratic in practice is untrue. It seems that America's misconception that autonomy bears rebellion has endured and resulted in a polarizing and strangely undemocratic curriculum. It is my belief that this misconception is the main obstacle to a truly democratic curriculum.

### **The Standard of Empowerment**

There is a tendency to consider young people within a framework which is more inclined to control and direct them rather than to empower and liberate them (Vick, 1993). I agree strongly with Vick's argument that "young people are consistently represented in ways which construct them as the objects of others' concern and action, and provide almost no alternative view of them as active agents or legitimate participants in the processes shaping their schooling" (p.31). There are many possible reasons for this. Perhaps the most obvious being that, as young people, they lack the experience necessary to make informed decisions. Another is that children are the responsibility of adults and as such, decisions should be made on behalf of them, not by them.

And of course, there is the fear that too many choices would be overwhelming to a young person, resulting in a decision made out of haste rather than one that was well thought through and made responsibly. Whatever the reason, it is, as Vick points out, "the very terms in which we think of young people and their education that make it virtually impossible for us to imagine them as independent, responsible agents in their own lives."(p.36). And why should we think differently?

For the past year we have been paralyzed with fear that a gun-toting fourteen-year-old is going to depopulate our classrooms. We are implementing statewide "code red" safety procedures so that, in the case of such an atrocity, our students will at least be prepared to protect themselves. Violence is associated with our children these days and now I am asking that we see them as responsible enough to take some control of their education? Yes.

Perhaps if we give our children some control in a safe, supervised, risk-free environment, they won't seek it elsewhere. If we expect our children to be responsible and to feel empowered, chances are more likely that they will live up to these expectations. More importantly, if we require our children to expect this of themselves, the responsibility becomes real and challenging. I am not recommending that we give our children free reign over the institution of education. Nor am I proposing that we allow them to lead themselves unsupervised in their educational endeavors. I am indicating that, if we want to provide an educational system that will produce real and lasting results, the very people who hold the highest stakes -- the students-- need to be represented in the planning. Deliberating a curriculum without including the students is like baking bread without including the yeast. We are missing the most important ingredient.

### **The Standard of Freedom**

It is necessary to differentiate between a curriculum in which students learn how to learn and one in which students learn what to learn, essentially, how to think and act. The latter is typical of an elementary school curriculum. In the political arena, this type of management is authoritarianism. In the educational arena, we prefer to call it curriculum. Kincheloe (1999) warns us that the "ideological web" (p. 74) constructed by this authoritarianism produces a "view of citizenship

that is passive" and "a view of learning that means listening" (p. 74). Education becomes nothing more than the compilation of facts, figures, acronyms, and selected information. The teacher becomes nothing more than a messenger of this package; the student nothing more than a recipient.

Ted Sizer, the founder of the Coalition for Essential Schools, talks about the purpose of a democratic education as being "to help young people become intellectually free" (p.2).

Intellectual freedom insinuates the presence of choices. The choices that I am referring to are perhaps best explained by borrowing Maxine Greene's explanation of human freedom.

Greene (1988) acknowledges that there two poles of freedom that are necessary to acquire "democratically liberated consciousness" (Henderson, 1999, p. 7). Negative freedom refers to "the right not to be interfered with or coerced or compelled to do what [one] did not choose to do" (p.16). Positive freedom, on the other hand, refers to the right of "self-direction." As adults, we tend to embrace these freedoms as our rights because we are citizens of a democratic society. Yet, we deny our children these freedoms by setting forth mandates. We masquerade behind the notion that we are nurturing our children; protecting them from making the wrong choices, when we are basically denying them of their rights. As adults, we would not tolerate externally imposed aims, particularly ones that dictate what we need to know. We certainly would not allow our knowledge to be tested unfairly and then suffer the consequences. Does democracy not extend into the realm of childhood? Let me explain that I am not suggesting that we remove all rules for our children. That would be irresponsible and unrealistic. What I am suggesting is that we remove whatever rule has said that society must decide for children what is important for them to learn about without consulting them or taking their interests into consideration.

## **The Standard of Truth**

Curriculum is never neutral. There is nothing random about what is chosen to be taught in our schools. A certain and specific body of knowledge is deemed relevant, meaningful, and indispensable by some group of policy makers. In keeping with tradition and the needs of society, a small group of adults dictate what is real and true for our children. This predisposed reality, revealed as curriculum, leaves little room for self-discovery or genuine experience. It is constructed by those in a position of power and passively accepted by society as the truth. We make an assumption of infallibility here and, unfortunately, while we hope that it is to benefit our children, in actuality, it is at their expense. This is what Joe Kincheloe (1999) has termed the "crisis of democracy"(p. 74). Kincheloe urges us to be aware of the "power disparity"(p.75) that exists in our schools. He alerts us to the dangers of our willingness to accept schooling as "an objective purveyor of truth" (p.75). As a result of this willingness, we are voluntarily blind to the fact that our curricula are not concerned with the social construction of knowledge, but with the attainment of a standards-based, results driven, common core of knowledge.

## **The Massachusetts Common Core of Learning**

In November of 1992, the Board of Education stated that the mission of public education in Massachusetts is to "provide each and every child with the values, knowledge, and skills needed to achieve full potential in his or her personal and work life and to contribute actively to the civic

and economic life of our diverse and changing democratic society." Let us read this mission "deconstructively."(Derrida, 1972).

First, since the inception of public education, society has struggled with the central mission of education (ASCD, 1996). The Massachusetts Board of Education presumes to know exactly what each and every child, in each and every public school classroom across the state, will require to achieve full potential in his or her life. Why do we not doubt the Board's ability to anticipate what each and every child will need to live successful lives? How can we not question their omnipotence?

Second, the Board proposes to provide our students with the knowledge and skills that they will need "to contribute actively to the civic and economic life of our diverse and changing democratic society." Please note that this is to be done without the students having the opportunity to actually be democratic. Being democratic implies participation in the decision making that affects one's life. We are, in essence, giving our students a superficial understanding of democracy. We tell them (usually in the context of American History) that there is something called democracy and that they will need to contribute actively to our democratic society, but we do not give them the opportunity to be democratic. By doing this, we are compromising what it means to be democratic; manipulating it to fit into a context which essentially has little to do with the practice of democracy. We are taking democracy out of the realm of social and civic behavior and into the realm of textbook ideology. As Dewey (1916a) points out, this has become the "ordinary notion of education":

Taking the ordinary standard of reality as a measure, it is artificial. For this measure is connected with practical concerns. Such material exists in a world by itself, unassimilated to ordinary customs of thought and expression. There is a standing danger that the material of formal instruction will be merely the subject matter of the schools, isolated from the subject matter of life-experience. . . . Thus we reach the ordinary notion of education: the notion which ignores its social necessity and its identity with all human association that affects conscious life, and which identifies it with imparting information about remote matters and the conveying of learning through verbal signs: the acquisition of literacy. (p. 9).

We must let our children know that democracy is a very real thing, that it informed the lives of our fore-fathers and continues to inform our lives today. It does not exist solely on the pages of a textbook, but also in the day-to-day interactions of the American people. As Gregory Valde (1999) explains, "It is children's daily experience in school that will provide much of their vision of community, their sense of purpose or purposelessness, and their sense of connection or alienation" (p.1).

Third, please note that the Board's mission applies to "each and every child." The word "each" would suggest a somewhat individualized curriculum, one that would recognize the needs of each child in the specific framework of that child's life. The word "every" suggests a more standardized curriculum, one in which the child is fit into the curriculum rather than the curriculum being fit to the child. If, in fact, this mission were applied to both "each child" and "every child" then it would seem that our student population is extremely homogeneous. If my

classroom is in any way indicative of other classrooms across the state, I would say that our students population is anything but homogeneous. Sure, there may be a few exceptions, but I am confident that our students are truly a multicultural group. So, which is it Massachusetts - each or every?

I suppose the question has been answered already. In May of 1998 the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) was administered for the first time to all fourth, eighth, and tenth grade students in public schools across the state. By measuring student performance based exclusively on a "results driven" set of curriculum documents, Massachusetts set out to promote high academic standards for all of their public school students and create a new system of accountability.

### **The Standard of Accountability**

The MCAS was developed to respond to the Education Reform Law of 1993, specifically Section 27 - Quality Education As The Goal of The Commonwealth:

This section declares that a paramount goal of the Commonwealth is to provide a public education system of sufficient quality to extend to all children the opportunity to reach their full potential. It also declares the intent of the bill which is to ensure that each classroom provides the conditions for all pupils to engage fully in learning without threats to their sense of security or self-esteem; a consistent commitment of resources to provide a high quality public education to every child; a deliberate process for establishing and achieving specific educational performance goals for every child, and an effective mechanism for monitoring progress toward those goals and for holding educators accountable for their achievement. (p.11)

We implemented these tests to respond to the need for quality education in the Commonwealth; a goal which included the promise of "learning without threats to their sense of security or self-esteem." The bottom line is that these tests present a very serious threat to our students' sense of security and self-esteem. In the context of these tests, our students are like tomatoes on a conveyor belt. They are all subject to the same degree of scrutiny and are all limited to fit into only one of four "grades". Those who are able to maintain enough stamina to complete these tedious tests, those who have good memorization skills, those who are good guessers and strong test takers - those are the children who are considered smart and successful according to these tests. And what of the rest of our students? For not performing acceptably on these tests, our students are now taken out of their elective classes and put into "MCAS Ramp Up" programs.

We are warning high school sophomores that their graduation is pending a passing score on the MCAS. There is something so very wrong, so very developmentally inappropriate; so very undemocratic here. To expand on my metaphor, we do not fault the tomato for not meeting our standards. We look to the people responsible for growing and harvesting the tomato. These tests are intended to be "an effective mechanism" for "holding educators accountable", yet the consequences of these tests are not suffered by the educators. It is our students who are suffering the consequences. If these goals are not met then it is we who have failed, not our students.

According to Dewey (1916c), "an educational aim must be founded upon the intrinsic activities and needs of the given individual to be educated" (p.7). This is not a suggestion, but a mandate. "Aims", Dewey says, "mean acceptance of responsibility for the observations, anticipations, and arrangements required in carrying on a function" (p.7). For one to set forth an aim and then measure the successful achievement of that aim by testing another is not only unfair, it is foolish.

The educator, like the farmer, has certain things to do, certain resources with which to do, and certain obstacle with which to contend. The conditions with which the farmer deals, whether as obstacles or resources, have their own structure and operation, independently of any purpose of his. Seeds sprout, rain falls, the sun shines, insects devour, blight comes, the seasons change. His aim is simply to utilize these various conditions; to make his activities and their energies work together, instead of against one another. It would be absurd if the farmer setup of purpose of farming, without any reference to these conditions of soil, climate, characteristic of plant growth, etc.. It is the same with the educator, whether parent or teacher. It is absurd for the latter to set up his "own" aims as the proper objects of the growth of the children as it would be for the farmer to set up an ideal of farming irrespective of conditions. ( p.7)

Hence, we come to realize the failures of schooling in Massachusetts. Through the Common Core of Learning, we have literally set up our own aims as the proper objects of the growth of our students. By implementing the MCAS exams, we have established an ideal of education irrespective of conditions.

Dewey (1916b) also reminds us of Plato's definition of a slave as "one who accepts from another the purposes which control his conduct" (p.3). He is careful to explain that slavery is not limited to the legal sense, rather "it is found wherever men are engaged in activity which is socially serviceable, but whose service they do not understand and have no personal interest in" (p.3). If we are to accept Plato's definition, it would seem that our students have been enslaved by the educational institutions which claim to liberate them.

### **The Standard of a Truly Democratic Curriculum**

The other night I watched a movie called "Outside Providence." There is a scene in which the dean of a private preparatory school is giving a commencement speech to the students. He speaks about how other schools are "liberalizing" their curriculums and have therefore, "grown to expect less from their students." I feel that by liberalizing the curriculum, we are not only expecting more from our students, we are demanding more from them. By participating in curriculum design, students are expected to participate as democratic citizens in curriculum deliberations; to engage in meaningful dialogue relevant to their lives and their learning and to make informed decisions on their own behalf. A truly democratic curriculum would release students from the oppressive relationship they currently endure as a result of the top-down management that is reflected in today's public school curricula. This would give them a platform in which to voice their interests, exercise their freedom, take pride in their accomplishments and be responsible for themselves. What better way to prepare our students to be democratic citizens?

### **The Standard of Action**

I have written this paper to raise awareness of the terribly destructive, hegemonic relationship

that is rampant in our society and in our schools. The victims of this hegemony are our students and unless we dedicate ourselves to a more democratic and inclusive curriculum practice, we will continue to be the oppressors. Giving students the right to pursue and express their interests should be a basic and widely implemented democratic practice. We must insist upon student input and participation in the curriculum design process. When students see the value of their participation, they will see democracy in action.