

Concerned About Civic Learning? *Consider the Learning Environment*

BY STACIE MOLNAR-MAIN

Many teachers are worried about how partisan politics and social media are impacting how their students understand their role in democracy. At the same time, some are facing pressure to teach history and civics in a particular way or to avoid addressing current issues in their classrooms altogether. As challenging as the political environment may be, teachers do not need to shy away from teaching their students the challenges and virtues of democratic self-governance. Democracy can inform how their classrooms operate and how they choose to teach. It is more than a curriculum. It is part and parcel of the learning environment.

What you see and feel when you walk into a school or classroom says a lot about what learning is valued there. When there is student work decorating the walls and smiling faces to greet you, visitors immediately sense an ethos of care. But what should a visitor look for if they are interested in sensing whether the school or classroom is a place that values civic learning and democracy?

I asked this question to a group of elementary teachers who are committed to teaching the skills of deliberative democracy to their young students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Deliberative democracy is an approach to democratic participation that centers citizen deliberation as a core practice for learning about and acting on public issues. In its simplest form, deliberation involves a group of citizens weighing different options and their trade-offs when deciding how to act. The educators—from Pennsylvania, Arizona, New York, and Louisiana—had been using deliberation in their classrooms as an integrated part of social-emotional and academic instruction and as one approach for engaging students in solving school or community problems.

The teachers gathered in Dayton, Ohio, at the Kettering Foundation—a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute that studies the public’s role in democracy—to reflect on what they had learned about how to teach this approach to democracy and what visitors to their classrooms should look for as evidence that civic learning is happening. Surprisingly, the “building blocks” for deliberative citizenship that they identified did not require a specific curriculum or set of content standards (though these can certainly be helpful). Instead, the building blocks involved an orientation toward elementary learning that centered on five important skills and dispositions: communication, perspective taking and empathy, students’ sense of agency, deliberative decision-making, and students’ sense of belonging to a democratic community.

The Importance of the Learning Environment

According to elementary teachers, these building blocks of deliberative citizenship are best taught to young children by approaching preparation for democracy as “a way of classroom life.” From the physical arrangement of desks to the selection of learning resources to the quality of social relationships and the types of feedback provided to students, learning environments focused on teaching democracy are places where participation, belonging, and collective problem-solving are centered. They are also places where discussions are common, where students’ voices and opinions are respected, and where students have opportunities to engage in conceptual reasoning about real-life issues that affect community life. So, what are some features of a learning environment that convey these democratic ideals and reinforce the skills of deliberative democracy?

Here are few things to look for:

- **Visible Democratic Norms.** Democratic classroom norms are shared agreements that go beyond traditional classroom rules and convey how power is shared among members of the school or class community. They typically include norms that support civil engagement, as well as norms that value diverse perspectives and establish group processes for community life and governance. Look for posters and other visual cues that communicate classroom rules (or agreements) and notice the values and forms of participation they encourage. Also, attend to how the classroom furniture is arranged and how students

engage with one another. Is participation, inclusivity, and student voice visible? Are desks set up to encourage interaction between students? Are students conscious about how they are learning and working together?

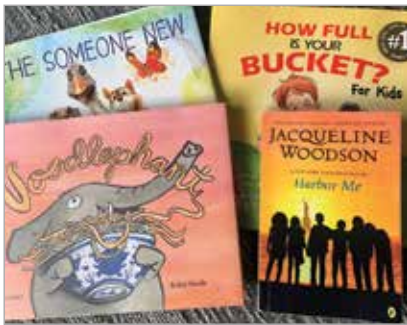
The ways in which the class engages with students who are not following the norms is important too. Teachers who wish to foster a democratic learning environment focus on reinforcing and upholding democratic classroom norms, while also being careful to convey—through words, actions, and approaches to classroom discipline—that all students are valued members of the class community. This focus is critical because students may not be motivated to work across interpersonal divides or consider the perspectives of their peers if classroom interactions suggest that some students are less valued by the teacher than others. When teachers honor the inherent dignity of every student in their day-to-day interactions, they model norms of inclusivity, empathy, and fairness and reinforce all students' sense of belonging to a democratic classroom community.

- **Routines of Civic Care.** Routines of civic care ensure that effort is directed at fostering the types of relationships, skills, and roles that will enable students to function as a diverse and vibrant community that can solve problems together. In a classroom committed to promoting civic learning, “sacred time” is dedicated within the classroom schedule to ensure that community-building activities occur on a regular basis (e.g., cooperative games, compliments, sharing activities, etc.), students practice the soft-skills of classroom citizenship (e.g., active listening, perspective taking, expressing disagreement and care, questioning, etc.), and students have forums for talking about what is on their minds. Students also play a role in caring for their learning community through classroom jobs, routine service activities, and service-learning projects. Look for evidence of student involvement in school or classroom service as well as evidence of regular classroom meetings where students are involved in shaping the direction of the class community.

Classroom meetings are oriented toward democracy when teachers and students work together to set the meeting agenda and lead the meetings. Classroom meetings also provide

opportunities for students to learn and practice the skills of group decision-making, such as naming and describing problems from different points of view, brainstorming solutions, and considering possible outcomes before deciding on a course of action.

- **Diverse Narratives.** Students are more likely to feel a sense of belonging to a democratic community when their experiences, histories, and interests are recognized within the classroom alongside others' experiences. Classrooms that value democracy



embrace the diverse narratives that make up our shared and distinct stories and celebrate the ways that students' personal experiences contribute to how they experience community and the learning environment. Elementary teachers introduce their students to diverse voices by encouraging students to

identify many different points of view, by selecting classroom literature that highlights the everyday experiences and resilience of diverse characters and historic figures, and by creating assignments that provide opportunities for students to explore and share stories from their community and beyond. Rather than presenting narratives as simplistic or two-sided, teachers encourage students to explore the complexity of human experiences, celebrate differences, and draw connections to community life. When educators model and teach students to listen to “voices not in the room,” they are demonstrating that democracy requires listening, learning from, and holding space for others. History and literature provide an obvious context for reinforcing student learning about others' experiences. Teachers who wish to create a learning environment that uplifts diverse narratives are intentional about highlighting less prominent narratives in history and literature alongside more well-known narratives.

- **Choice and Voice** –The heart of democracy is power shared among people who have different personal interests and varied notions of the common good. In authoritarian settings,

the tension between individual rights and responsibilities is resolved by a force that wields power over the people. This can be true in classrooms too—when a teacher holds all the power and students’ voices are curtailed. Classrooms that foster a sense of belonging to a democratic community are places where students have many opportunities to make choices—in their schoolwork, about how they use their free time, and about classroom matters. They are also places where students are encouraged to exercise their voice in classroom. Look for evidence of students using their voices in small and large group discussions, in deliberations and debates, and in writing, art, and performance that connects personal experience with school or community issues. It is especially important to see examples of students expressing ideas that are different from the teachers’ ideas, as this suggests classroom norms support individual expression, critical thinking, and dissent within the class community.

Creating Space for Democracy in the Learning Environment

Because educators tend to be trained to manage and reward student behavior to promote orderly classrooms, some may not automatically consider the role of the learning environment in teaching for democratic self-governance. Indeed, research has found that it is common for teachers to promote the values of “kindness” and “good behavior” in their classrooms without as much attention to such things as justice, critical thinking, and collective problem-solving. This tendency can result in a powerful hidden curriculum in schools that discourages participation and critical engagement, as well as other important aspects of engaged citizenship. That is why it is so important to create space within school systems for teachers to consider how their work can be better aligned with the ideals of democracy and engaged citizenship. When teachers have space to focus on the types of skills and dispositions citizens need to problem-solve together, they begin to see more opportunities for integrating civic-oriented skills into their classroom.

One common teaching practice that can be easily aligned with civic learning in elementary classrooms is story time, also known as the interactive read aloud method. During interactive read alouds, teachers focus on building students’ comprehension skills by pausing and asking them to recall information, draw inferences, or make predictions about

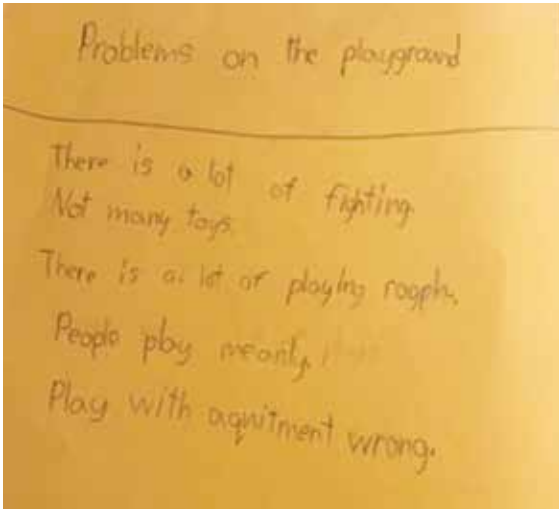
the story or characters. Teachers who approach story time with civic learning in mind adapt their questioning to encourage students to consider questions related to community life, civic skills, and civic values that may be inherent within a story's narrative. Lori McGarry, a teacher from State College, Pennsylvania who has attended meetings at the Kettering Foundation, teaches her students to ask "citizen questions" while they are reading classroom literature. According to McGarry, citizen questions are "authentic and posed by students, problem-based or need-based, linked to community, and action focused." They are used to bridge themes in literature with students' life experiences, making the connections between classroom learning, community issues, and civic action explicit.

Marie Chieco, a former teacher from Johnson City (New York) Elementary, has drawn connections between teaching democracy and teaching mathematics. Chieco has students explain the strategies that they use to solve numeric problems and analyze the pros and cons of different strategies. In doing this, she addresses learning standards that require students to be able to solve math problems using more than one strategy. She extends and connects her students' learning to deliberative democratic citizenship by requiring problem-solving to be a public activity and by engaging students in analyzing the trade-offs associated with different approaches to finding the solutions. In this way, students can learn from others' thinking and experience mathematics as a community activity. When these same problem-solving norms are revisited in the context of a classroom or recess problem, students can seamlessly enact the same type of collective problem-solving skills.



Elementary students from Oracle, Arizona describe recess problems in their own words before deliberating about possible solutions.

Social emotional learning (SEL) programs can also provide a relevant context for reinforcing civic skills, especially when teachers are intentional about orienting students' engagement in SEL to the skills of democratic citizenship. Katrina Telles and Amy McDonald teach at an elementary school in Oracle, Arizona, and they use the SEL program CosmoKidz with their first and second grade students. CosmoKidz reinforces basic communication skills and problem-solving skills through puppets, social activities, and interpersonal scenarios that are commonly experienced by young children. Telles and McDonald orient CosmoKidz toward civic learning by introducing the vocabulary of deliberative citizenship alongside CosmoKids vocabulary, by allowing students to bring real problems of community life into the lessons, and by providing students opportunities to solve those problems. For example, in 2017 Telles' second graders identified "playground problems" as an issue that needed to be addressed. Fighting, mean behavior, and inappropriate use of playground equipment were resulting in disciplinary responses that made recess "not fun." Using the problem-solving skills taught through CosmoKidz and connected to deliberative democracy, the second graders named the problem and deliberated about possible solutions. Through this process, they decided to implement "old-school games" at recess (their term for games like Red Rover and Four Square) and they wrote letters to the principal requesting that she purchase new gym equipment for the playground.



An example of how second graders name "playground problems" in their own terms.

These types of experiences demonstrate how teachers' day-to-day decisions about the learning environment can offer powerful lessons about engaged citizenship. As public debate intensifies about what content to uplift in schools, it can be easy to ignore the opportunities that exist for civic learning outside of social studies textbooks and formal curricular structures. Yet, schools are the social institutions in which our future republic steps. By focusing on aligning learning environments with the demands of democratic citizenship, educators can effectively teach the virtues and skills of democratic self-governance and play a role in strengthening democracy.

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